

Let's Hear It For The Deaf Man



David Langford

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Author's Note: Uncredited fillers previously appeared in my own *Ansible* (first series, 1979–1987), *Platen Stories* (1987), *Sglodion* (1989–) and *The Transatlantic Hearing Aid* (1985); also in *8000 Plus*, *Paperback Inferno*, *Pulp*, *Wiz* and, I think, one unpublished letter. Hero editor Ben Yalow and his team of Illuminati did all the work and made all the choices from a huge pile of disks and crumbling paper—many thanks! Notes for the puzzled: the mysterious *8000 Plus* is a glossy monthly devoted to the weird but cheap Amstrad “PCW 8000 series” word processors used by countless impoverished Brits. *Million* is *Interzone*'s sister magazine, its subject being popular fiction other than SF. (“As opposed to *Interzone*, the magazine of unpopular fiction,” I said incautiously within the hearing of editor David Pringle.) A tip of the hat to Chris Priest, who is quoted at length, and to Abigail Frost, one of whose anonymous bits of wickedness appears here as though written by me (ho ho). Lastly, my apologies for certain repeated gags, now brought together in embarrassing proximity. The old ones are the best ones....

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Ben Yalow, Editor
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CONTRIVANCES

Note: This piece was originally requested by—and its title specified by—the 1989 British Eastercon, called for no apparent reason Contrivance. The final section alludes distantly to the joint guests of honour, who were...oh, surely you can work it out.

Who can forget the great contrivances of SF, the astonishing hypertechnological inventions which thrilled us in childhood? Me, for one. But to celebrate this convention's name, let us dwell for a moment on some especially wonderful and egregious examples....

I. No prediction of technology could be more striking than this sequence from Hugo Gernsback's classic *Ralph 1.2c* (1925). The background: a complex multiplication of two difficult numbers must be performed against time before the radium furnace blows up.

"Fear not!" cried Ralph as his companions marvelled one and all. From his pocket (manufactured in this advanced future from a new, hygienic helium fabric) he produced the *Transvective Computer!*

"Multiplying pi by 3.14 is made simple by this, my newest invention. See how I set up the calculation by a motion of the Algorithmic Analogue Slide, based on the latest Napierian Logarithm Tables! You will note that the Multiplicative Product may now be read *instantaneously* from the Geometric Rule Alignment...."

The detonation of the furnace before this speech has reached its third page then gives Ralph a chance to demonstrate his experimental technology for reviving the dead, which fortuitously is in his other pocket.

II. At the heart of L. Ron Hubbard's classic *Ole Doc Ripoff* (1950) is a device consisting of two cocoa tins, a used battery and a galvanometer. The cheekily megalomaniac protagonist makes a huge fortune by unscrupulously pretending that this gadget can read the innermost secrets of the human heart. Students of Hubbard's self-confessed satirical brilliance believe this book's barbs to be aimed at the evil international cult known as "psychologists".

III. Golden Age master Bron Torro achieved his most magnificent effect in *Wordcount 40,000 X* (1959), in which, as every reader will remember, the conclusion sees a lone Earth ship under attack by 97 billion planet-sized alien superdreadnaughts all projecting death-rays of instantaneous and total lethality. The brilliant closing lines have been set to music:

"Suddenly the Captain realized. Such high-energy rays must be unstable, inflammable! He drew out his cigarette lighter. Click. As the first rays reached the tiny flame, the alien fleet was consumed

in a burning backlash of incandescence, of strange flaming fire, of fiery blazing alien flame, of superheated, overheated, inflamed, molten, red-hot, calescent, feverish, sweltering, boiling, scalding, tropical, scorching warmth.

"The alien threat was over."

The virtuoso craftsmanship of this is best appreciated by realizing that the text has now reached exactly 39,998 words, so that the contracted length could then be met by typing THE END.

IV. Although the device was later misattributed, Brian Aldiss's *The Fountains of Hothouse* (1962) definitively pioneered the organic space elevator, based on the concept of carbon-fibre cobwebs sturdy enough to support the weight of the Moon. Aldiss had actually suggested this magnificently biodegradable structure in an earlier piece of non-fiction which was submitted to *Entomology World* in 1945, but rejected since through a typing error it was delivered to *Etymology World*.

V. Bursting the barriers of hard science fiction, Arthur C. Clarke himself gave us *Rama 20,001* (1973), in which SF's most astonishing piece of miracle technology is unveiled. This is already too famous to describe here. As one of the characters observes when at last the device is seen in operation:

"There goes Newton's Third Law. Not to mention his second, his first, the conservation of angular momentum, the laws of thermodynamics, the theory of relativity, the principle of causality, and the seven-times table."

Rigorously extrapolative SF can surely go no further.

VI. The sexual revolution was given an exciting new twist in Robert Heinlein's *Time Enough for Incest* (1982), by his contrivance of the transdimensional spungometer. As manipulated by the book's hero Lazarus Wellhung, this incredible device liberates women by nudging their bras simultaneously from three mutually perpendicular directions, causing the garment to be hurled off into extraliterary space with a loud noise of onomatopoeia.

(See also Darko Suvin's critical commentary, "Cognitive Estrangement and the Audible Nipples of Robert A. Heinlein: A Marxist-Feminist-Libertarian Analysis"—*Playboy*, 1984.)

VII. Perhaps the most devilish of the high-technology pitfalls thought up by Harry Harrison for his famous rogue hero appears in *The Stainless Steel Rat Gets Recycled* (1987). Here the lovable diGriz is lured by an aggressive archfiend known only as HH into that diabolical invention the Narrative Helix—plunging him into an endless succession of sequels *all of which have exactly the same plot!* Can Slippery Jim escape this terrible trap? Wait for the sequel....

VIII. An ingenious conceptual contrivance is

introduced in Isaac Asimov's *Postlude to Robots and Foundation, Part II* (1988): the Fifth Law of Robotics. One of the greatest difficulties of Asimov's belatedly linked-up cosmos has been the need to explain the vanishing of the entire robot industry and technology before the rise of his Galactic Empire. The Fifth Law is the answer, running as it does:

"All the laws of robotics are false, including this one."

On being told the Fifth Law, robots conveniently seize up, go insane, or become psychohistorians.

IX. In Greg Bear's *Omneity Plus*, the just-completed sequel to *Eon* and *Eternity*, our author faces the challenge of outdoing his previous big spectacles of nuclear holocaust, the end of the universe and the destruction of infinity itself. Following the book's routine scenes in which uncountably many transfinite multiverses are fierily polished off, the great coup comes on the final page. After God Himself has been annihilated in a mighty burst of mesons, tachyons, peons and jargons, Bear ushers in the new era of interactive SF. Reading the concluding words *THE END (OR IS IT?)* will automatically detonate a lethal Semtex charge concealed in the book's spine. This is thought likely to affect its prospects of a Hugo nomination, though not as much as you might think.

X. Fans are eagerly awaiting the forthcoming collaboration *Dragonriders of Viriconium*—in which a strange metaphysical 'flu spreads insidiously through the Decadent Quarter of planet Pern, absinthe puts the Masterharper under the table at the Bistro Californium, and the Weyrs are filled with fish-and-chip wrappings. All seems lost until *fin-de-siècle* dragonpainter A'slyme hits on a contrivance which, by harnessing a brace of time-travelling fire lizards to a stray Centauri Device found in a convenient cave, will....[Our guests' lawyers say we must not give away any more of this plot. Ed.]

ANSIBLE 29, delayed by fire, flood, poverty, Milford and non-appearance of certain promised contributions, emerges fully armed from the forehead of DAVE LANGFORD....Your sub may be excitingly prolonged by hot news contributions if adequately non-tepid—as they say, "Asimov's Rejects Story" isn't news, but "Asimov Story Rejected" is.

TRILLION YEAR SNEER

There's a terrible gap between the evening when an almost harmless-looking Conspiracy committee person says "Can you say a few rude things about bad books you've covered lately?" and the day when you read in L. Ron Hubbard's *Pocket Programme of the Future* that "Dave Langford analyses all the SF and fantasy novels published since 1979 and carefully places each work in its proper literary and socio-political context."

I seem to be here talking about the last few years in bad science fiction because our ever-loving Committee folk think I'm an expert. Their reason for this strange belief is that through five long years I've bashed out a monthly review column, pretending to cover all the SF and fantasy published in Britain. This does not in fact leave you an expert—it leaves you a gibbering, drooling wreck who doesn't dare open the post in case it contains another six fantasy trilogies, all in the great tradition of Terry Brooks.

The feeling isn't exactly new. In 1929 Cyril Connolly wrote an essay called "Ninety Years of Novel-Reviewing". It starts like this:

The reviewing of novels is the white man's grave of journalism; it corresponds, in letters, to building bridges in some impossible tropical climate. The work is gruelling, unhealthy and ill-paid, and for each scant clearing made wearily among the springing vegetation the jungle overnight encroaches twice as far. A novel-reviewer is too old at thirty; early retirement is inevitable...and their later writings all exhibit a bitter and splenetic brilliance whose secret is only learnt in the ravages on the liver made by their terrible school.

Quite.

Myself, I don't think of it as a jungle so much as an endless prairie...like that 5000-mile trek over heavily clichéd country that you meet in the middle volumes of all those trilogies. On one hand, the fiftieth sort-of-OK fantasy about the protracted and unlikely defeat of an implausibly motivated Black Lord may not be hugely inferior to the first or the tenth, but by that time the sheer monotony has ground down the poor bloody reviewer to a state of "Oh no, not again."

On the other hand, the teensiest molehill of quality starts looking like the Alps after all those dreary plainlands, and can be greeted with far more ecstasy than it deserves....There are plenty of examples in my own review column, which I'm glad most of you will never read. Connolly had a word about this, too:

An unpleasant sight in the jungle is the reviewer who goes native. Instead of fighting the vegetation, he succumbs to

it, and running perpetually from flower to flower, he welcomes each with cries of "Genius!" "What grace, what irony and distinction, what passionate sincerity!" he exclaims as the *Foundation* sequels reproduce themselves rapidly....

All right, I cheated and changed a word or two in that last sentence.

My favourite example of the perils of reviewing is *The Science Fiction Sourcebook*, edited by David Wingrove, in which hordes of books are rated under various headings in terms of stars—a sort of Michelin Guide to SF. For example, the maximum five stars for Characterization means that the writer can create ever such wonderfully convincing and alive characters. Stick a pin in the page, and they bleed. According to the *Sourcebook*, not many authors can do this topnotch characterization: Kingsley Amis, James Blish and Marion Zimmer Bradley can't, nor John Brunner, nor—to choose a few more at random—Anthony Burgess, Thomas Disch, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, E. M. Forster, Russell Hoban, Robert P. Holdstock, Rudyard Kipling, Tanith Lee, Vonda McIntyre, Christopher Priest, Salman Rushdie, Robert Louis Stevenson, Theodore Sturgeon, Lisa Tuttle, Evelyn Waugh, Kate Wilhelm or John Wyndham. None of these has got what it takes. You might ask, well, if the standards are that high, does *any* writer consistently get five *Sourcebook* stars for Characterization? I will mention one: Jack Chalker.

Actually I quite like the *SF Sourcebook*, since besides rating Barry B. Longyear at zero in all categories, it gave my own little SF novel five stars for Readability, which not only puts me ahead of *all* the writers I've just mentioned (except for Jack Chalker) but makes me more readable than Jack Vance and Alfred Bester, har har.

But the category where the competition gets really hot is Literary Merit. Get five stars for Literary Merit and you're out there in front of tired old hacks like Brian Aldiss, Philip K. Dick, Aldous Huxley, Stanislaw Lem, George Orwell, Mary Shelley, Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut and H. G. Wells (not to mention all the writers in my first list). Five stars for Literary Merit places you amongst the real earth-shaking giants of literature, who according to the *Sourcebook* include Philip José Farmer, Charles Sheffield and James White.

This is a cautionary tale—a bit extreme, maybe, but if I read out all my SF reviews for the last five years, there'd be almost as many embarrassing inconsistencies. What Conspiracy asked me to do is offer some highlights—or preferably, they said, lowlights. Sir Isaac Newton once looked back on his life of science and said it had all been a bit like picking up pretty pebbles on the beach, "whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." I have much the same feeling about reviewing, except that I seem to have the slightly different knack of picking up small, beautifully glistening nodules of

untreated sewage. Let me share some of these with you....

BLURBS

These are a strangely neglected art-form. It's very difficult these days to find anything like the classic Lionel Fanthorpe blurb, which with rich suggestiveness went (roughly): "Who were these fantastic women...and why did they keep disturbing his eternal rest?"

Well, there's Theodore Roszak's *Bugs*, which is "The megashock novel of flesh-rending microchip horror!"—that's the one where the bugs come out of the computers and bite people. And Brian Lumley's *Demogorgon*, which remarks that "Only the ripe flesh of human females will satisfy the ancient lusts of DEMOGORGON!"

Recently, Nick Austin at Grafton Books told me that Westerns are dead. This makes you wonder where Western blurb-writers are working now; my theory is that they write blurbs for other genres. *The Sword of Bheleu* by Lawrence Watt-Evans offers this: "Once again, Garth the overman rode his warbeast into the decaying frontier town....He bore a sack of gold nuggets—I'm sorry, of loot from the ravaged altars of the dark gods—and beside him was his trusty six-gun—I'm sorry, the fearful sword of Bheleu, god of destruction." Et bloody cetera.

The current Grafton paperback catalogue shows Western blurb-writers at work on their romance list, by the way:

She thought she could handle Sam Brady, the brazen blonde cowpoke. But her untouched womanhood rioted under his gaze.

The horror nasty *Ghost Train* by Stephen Lawes has a back cover reading, in part, like this:

Loathsome. An unspeakable abomination. A horror buried so deep in his psyche he can remember not a single detail of what has been done to him. He stands in the railway station and shudders uncontrollably.

I've felt just that way myself after British Rail's bacon sandwiches.

My nomination for the daftest SF blurb quotation of the 1980s comes from Harlan Ellison: "If Le Carré had made it with Le Guin, their mutant offspring would have written this dandy novel." No, the book wasn't called *The Spy Who Came In From The Left Hand of Darkness*...it was Heinlein's *Friday*. I don't know whether Ursula Le Guin or John Le Carré sued.

SKIFFY JARGON

I think it must say somewhere at the back of the Science Fiction Writers of America handbook that you need to polish up your vocabulary when writing proper hard SF. There must be a little glossary which

budding authors can look up to learn the proper language and correct their first drafts, crossing out all those mentions of the Earth, Moon and Sun, and substituting Terra, Luna and Sol...crossing out "The silvery spaceship went very fast" and putting "The silvery spaceship went flt." [Pronounced "fittle".]

Doc Smith's posthumous novel *Subspace Encounter* nearly steals the show with gorgeous Smithian phrases, as poignant as electro-convulsive therapy. The word "Yes" translates into skiffy as "In sync to the skillionth of a whillionth of a nano-second!" I'm less sure about "The theretofore starkly unknowable environment of a zeta field," but I think that on the whole this must mean "I don't know what I'm writing about." Nothing here is quite as good as *Second Stage Lensmen's* rampantly priapic wedding, where "as Kinnison kissed his wife, half a million Lensed members were thrust upward in silent salute."

The true modern heir of Doc Smith's finely honed prose style seems to be Jack Chalker. Here he is, in a nifty bit of dialogue from *Twilight at the Well of Souls*:

"We're tearing a hole in the fabric of space-time! ...Sustained nullification on a huge scale might be beyond nature's ability to counteract!"

Few literate people were actually able to finish David Drake's *Hammer's Slammers*, but I assure you this too contains some real gems. "The body ballooned under the cyan impact"—no, I don't know either, but from textual evidence cyan seems to be the author's favourite colour. "Four pongoes were jumpered to Two Star"—doesn't that have the shifting elusiveness of James Joyce?

But for that old hard-science thrill of the fascinating intellectual possibilities of first alien contact, you have to go to *Footfall* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, with unforgettable lines like "Eat hot gamma rays, foolish Centaurans!" and, of course, "Nuke 'em till they glow, then shoot 'em in the dark."

Even acclaimed stories can contain tooth-hurting jargon. This is the opening of a recent Hugo-winner by David Brin:

"It was just a *luckychance* [one word] that I had been defrosted when I was—the very year that *farprobe* [one word] 992573-aa4 reported back that it had found a *goodstar* [one word] with a shattered *crystalsphere* [one word]. I was one of only twelve *deepspacers* [one word] *alivewarm* [one word] at the time...."

For somereason I'm never very convinced by futurejargon with togetherstuck wordpairs, and when I read it I always think *Doubleplusungood*.

POETIC BITS

Every writer likes to try and do perfect, poetic and evocative descriptions. Robert P. Faulcon, for

example, alias Rob Holdstock, in *The Stalking*:

His head suddenly began to peel, the flesh tearing away from the bone in ragged strips, like a pink banana.

I am probably going to be beaten up by litcrit heavies if I quote a poetic bit from Samuel Delany's much-praised *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, but here goes:

Tubes drained off the puce and fuchsia biles that, in a sort of antidigestive process, had, by their chemical actions, healed; had, by their tidal actions, exercised.

Now there's no actual law against describing intensive care in purple passages like this—but the sentence comes from the *conversation* of some bureaucrat who's reporting the patient's recovery and, well, blimey:

"How's Fred doing, doctor?"

"Don't worry, Mrs Bloggs. Tubes have drained off the puce and fuchsia biles that, in a sort of antidigestive process, had, by their chemical actions..." etc.

The same book gives us the paragraph which subtly echoes an old Heinlein opening by reading, in full, "The door deliquesced." Yes, this door really does melt down into a puddle, which you must be careful not to step in, since the liquid rapidly foams back up into solidity and could lend a whole new meaning to getting your foot in the door.

Delany has lots of virtues, but as I painfully pick my way through his later stuff I always remember Kingsley Amis's strictures on Nabokov:

Style, a personal style, a distinguished style, usually turns out in practice to mean a high idiosyncratic noise level in the writing, with plenty of rumble and wow from imagery, syntax and diction....

There's some much dustier and mouldier rhetoric in Nancy Springer's fantasy *The White Hart* (no, not *Tales from the White Hart*). Ringing sentences like: "But it was not for cowardice that Ellid was called daughter to Pryce Dacarin..." Close textual examination hints that it was chiefly because she was his daughter. "The stranger lifted a thick green limb for Ellid to creep beneath"...he only sounds like the Incredible Hulk: after the doubletake you discover that some trees were introduced a few sentences back.

Peter Morwood's middle-of-the-road fantasy *The Dragon Lord* suffers from the opposite problem: rather than being too old and grotty, the vocabulary of this olde-worlde fantasy has a bit too much that's new. It's bad enough when the denizens of a bygone land quote Kipling; when they use words like "adrenalin" and "scenario" you start to raise an eyebrow; and even the author belatedly realizes that "paranoia" is a mistake—having used it, one of the characters hastily thinks, "It was an odd, cumbersome, unAlban word...."

Norman Spinrad offers some pretty mindboggling polyglot prose in *The Void Captain's Tale* (subtitled *Moby Prick*), and one phrase was such a perceptive review of the book that I hardly needed to write my own. It went like this: "An all-too-necessary foma at the heart of our transtellar weltanschauung."

Another self-referential bit comes from Barbara Hambly's Darwath trilogy, whose first volume has a line about a "spatchcocked landscape". I had a mental crash of gears on reading this, and had to resort to the dictionary to confirm that, yes, it presumably does mean a landscape looking like a dead chicken that's been split down the back and grilled. After further research, though, I discovered the alternate meaning of "spatchcock" that Barbara Hambly must *really* have had in mind—it's also a verb meaning to interpolate words into a sentence or narrative, especially inappropriate ones. How could I argue?

You get more portentous stuff at the beginning of T. E. D. Klein's vast bloated horror novel *The Ceremonies*. Right there on page one we have:

Something older by far than humankind,
and darker than some vast and sunless
cavern of a world beyond the farthest
depths of space.

Quite apart from the thought that this is overdoing it a bit, one does rather wonder where exactly "beyond the farthest depths of space" might be, and whether a "sunless cavern" there is *necessarily* darker than one near Milton Keynes.

Meanwhile, an Australian fanzine got hold of and published an entire poem by Stephen Donaldson Himself, cut for unspecified but guessable reasons from *White Gold Wielder*. Two lines of this describe the life of a reviewer:

*Dead fishes could not him affright:
He flailed at whales all the night.*

It was also Donaldson who, trying to do an archaic style in one of his short stories, accurately summarized the feelings of many reviewers who ventured into the labyrinth of the Covenant books without a fat dictionary: "Mayhap all unknowing I ate the mushroom of madness." I certainly get a craving for a quick snack of the mushroom of madness whenever I remember the most unforgettable (and oft-reprinted here) lines from *White Gold Wielder*:

They were featureless and telic, like
lambent gangrene. They looked horribly
like children.

Another favourite line of rich, ripe poetry comes at the end of *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* by Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman and a supporting cast of thousands: *Through his doomed veins the horizon burst....*

William McGonagall could hardly do better. Speaking of Williams, William Morris's fantasies were written a bit before the 1980s, but I read *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* quite recently and thought you might like to know how a real master

handled the antique style. The story so far: our heroine has just repossessed a frock which had been swiped by a witch. She speaks to it thus:

Nay, ye have been in ill company, I will
wear you not, though ye be goodly, at
least not till ye have been fumigated....

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Fantasy fans will have been interested to watch the gradual spread of equal rights in Piers Anthony's Xanth series. As the books went by, civil rights were extended to centaurs, to ogres, to nightmares and—dramatically—even to women. The seventh book, *Dragon on a Pedestal*, goes further to admit a zombie, though this does look like tokenism since the zombie in question is a fairly fresh one who hardly smells at all. I'm now waiting for the Xanth book in which a gay character successfully emerges from the closet. I'm trying not to imagine its wittily relevant, punning title....

Equally heart-warming is the military loyalty which inspires those crack mercenaries Hammer's Slammers, as already mentioned. They're so determined to do the job, and so fearful that seeming chicken-heartedness will prejudice their future contracts, that they nobly disobey their own horrified employers' orders to stop slaughtering people and detonating irreplaceable shrines. There's dedication for you.

Of course sexism has long been a sensitive issue in SF and fantasy: Greg Benford and David Brin are fearlessly prepared to expand our consciousness in *Heart of the Comet*, where women are innovatively characterized as "deliciously unpredictable" with "breasts hard and high."

In *Code of the Lifemaker*, James P. Hogan goes further still! This book features an evolved robot civilization with genders just like ours, and scores another first for science-fiction with its bold prediction of robot sexism. Not only do all the female humans occupy subordinate roles, no female robot even gets a speaking part. This is, I *hope*, a bold stroke of satire....

Political differences are best treated with caution: one doesn't want to go round slagging every author who veers from the One True Politically Correct Way (i.e. mine). But I do jump up and down a bit on meeting a truly dishonestly loaded argument, as in the first and readable half of Heinlein's *The Cat Who Crapped Through Walls*. What happens is, this minor character gets all upset at the Moon's ideal libertarian society, and says wimpy things like "It's not fair" on discovering that if you can't pay the air charges you automatically die. The hero and Heinlein clearly disagree with this wishy-washy position: one grits one's teeth and allows as how they're entitled to their opinions. What makes me cringe is the way in which our aforementioned wimp, the only character in the entire book who thinks a few social services might be a good thing, is painstakingly established as

obnoxious, sponging, a criminal and—ultimately—a traitor. More or less what you'd expect of the token Jew in an SF novel by Adolf Hitler.

Finally, Isaac Asimov's *Robots and Empire* makes the mistake of adding a sequel to a trilogy which had seemed perfectly complete and self-contained for about 40 years...the trilogy being the Three Laws of Robotics. The new Zeroth Law is a dazzling step forward, allowing robots to get away with more than ever before, since it translates roughly as: "Whatever the other laws may say, stuff them: the end justifies the means." Oddly enough, Asimov doesn't seem worried about this.

GREAT MOMENTS IN CHARACTERIZATION

Piers Anthony, in *Blue Adept*, offers my all-time favourite doubletake as the hero threads his way down remote underground passages to confront the monstrous Worm (or Slug, or whatever it was) which has slain all previous applicants. Well, gosh, he thinks, here comes the big struggle, I'd better have my sword at the ready. Oops, I seem to have forgotten it. Well, too late to turn back now.

I'm sure you'll be relieved to hear that he wins anyway.

One of my pet theories is that Anthony's characters, with their world-famous slowness to understand things, are based on the creations of the great Lionel Fanthorpe:

What the devil could it be? he asked himself over and over again. He drew closer, and closer still. Then he recognized the peculiar gleaming object for what it was—a door handle!

Picky reviewers keep demanding that SF characters should not only be subtly drawn but should also be capable of changing as a result of the story they live through. Messrs Niven and Pournelle have a sensitive example of this in (again) *Footfall*, where in the aftermath of alien attack an ecologist loudly repents his foolish opposition to Star Wars (SDI) weapon systems. My God, he says, what a cretin I was, how lacking in elementary foresight, we were *bound* to need them to fight off invading aliens some day! And he very soon gets a chance to demonstrate his new commitment by drowning a less committed journalist in the toilet.

GREAT SCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS

It's usually easy to find some apparent cock-up in the average hard SF novel, but for a long time I had a theory that authors, being wholly godlike beings, probably knew something I didn't. I had the chance to put this to the test when on a panel with William Gibson: to subtly draw him out, I asked about a passage in *Count Zero* that had bothered me. Since it takes sixteen whole seconds for the dreaded "black ice" computer defence to eat into an unfortunate hacker's nervous system and fibrillate him to death,

it doesn't sound all that lethal: surely some sort of dead-man switch would give complete protection? Mr Gibson turned on me, and quick as a flash he snapped back: "Uh, I don't know, I hadn't thought of that." Then he went all silent and broody for the panel's remaining forty minutes.

There's a much dafter notion in a recent book of supposedly serious futurology, *The 2024 Report* by Norman Macrae. He says that the threat of nuclear war will be ended by "telecommuted computer messages" which you beam at approaching ballistic missiles, whereupon they turn around and head back for their launch silos. As you know, all the best missiles have radio receivers, easy-to-crack command languages, and lots of spare fuel in case they need to make a return trip.

Colin Wilson has probably read J. B. S. Haldane's 1927 essay explaining why giant insects don't make scientific sense, but this didn't prevent him from writing the deeply silly *Spider World*, in which oppressed humanity groans under the lash of giant death spiders. "The spider," writes Wilson, "is the only living creature that spends its life lying in wait, hoping that victims will walk into its trap." It would be a mite pedantic to complain that several beasts including ant lions do just the same...at least, it would be pedantic if it weren't that Wilson has apparently forgotten writing about an ant lion doing its stuff just eight pages previously.

Alfred Bester's perhaps never been the most rigorously scientific of authors, and in *The Deceivers* he gave us the interesting idea of an electric fence charged up to 1500 million volts: all I can say is, to hold a potential like that it must be a damn' well insulated electric fence. The book's other scientific innovation is crystallized helium.

John Brunner's *Interstellar Empire* (admittedly an early work) contains a subtle bit of environmental adaptation:

A slave with the hot brown skin of a Marzon and the twitching eyes of a man born under a variable star.

You know the way those pesky variable stars hurt your eyes, as they flicker like celestial strobe lights.

Walter Tevis, in *The Steps of the Sun*, improved on safe sex by giving us "safe uranium"... which lies around on this far planet in mountain-sized chunks and doesn't become radioactive until you magnetize it. I think Tevis must have got this from one of the different periodic tables used by the aliens in *Battlefield Earth*—which novel probably sets some kind of record for lousy science, but I've been over that ground in another and even more boring talk.

Science fiction, however, can never quite equal the real thing. In that famous textbook *The Gold of the Gods*, the coldly logical Erich von Däniken points to a photograph of a human skeleton carved in stone...and asks incredulously how, without instruction courses from ancient astronauts, stupid "heathens" could possibly have known what a human skeleton looked like? "As we know, Roentgen did not dis-

cover X rays until 1895!"

CREAKY PLOTS

Some sort of record in plotting is set by Robert Vardeman's and Victor Milan's six-book sequence *The War of Powers*. After finishing it I felt I'd spent a week at Butlin's listening to Muzak while eating nothing but monosodium-glutamate-flavoured crisps. It's 968 pages of junk food for the mind, and it doesn't half give you indigestion.

It also gives you precognitive powers, in the form of an eerie ability to predict the plot far in advance. Gosh, the hero and heroine are going to meet after long separation—looks like their interim lovers will have to be killed off—yep, there they go, both of them. Gosh, two major villains are written off in book 4 after plummeting from great heights, yet *no one saw them land*....Yep, here they are, luxuriating in new villainies for book 5.

Connoisseurs of fantasy hackwork will also enjoy the random variations in magic ability with the needs of the plot. One moment it's, "Alas, my powers are weak so far from my home city...." A few pages later, when said powers have got the authors out of a tight spot by doing something totally unprecedented, the explanation is, "My powers have grown with practice." As if this weren't enough, there's also an emergency plot-twiddling device called the Destiny Stone which—like red kryptonite in Superman comics—exists solely to account for ludicrous improbabilities.

Unfortunately there isn't a Destiny Stone in Frank and Brian Herbert's *Man of Two Worlds*, to account for the fact that the Dreen, omnipotent alien mind-masters, are helpless to withstand one mind-rotting earthly substance—basil.

Piers Anthony, who seems to be getting a lot of mentions today, introduced a cunning plot device in his novel *Refugee*: the airlock that doesn't lock. Because you can't lock the airlock, space-pirates have it easy: they just haul alongside and board the hero's refugee craft for several chapters of cruelly overwritten rape, loot and pillage. So popular a pastime is space-piracy, and so impossible is the invention of a lockable airlock, that our hero's ship is harrowingly raped, looted and pillaged no fewer than eight times in 333 pages. Crowded place, space.

Onward! Just as Heath Robinson's gadgets are held together with tatty lengths of knotted string, so a really unconvincing SF plot needs to be tied up with frayed threads of coincidence. I enjoyed watching a master plot-bodger at work in Anne McCaffrey's *Killashandra*, whose heroine arrives on a strange planet and promptly nips out in search of bootleg beer. As she takes her first swig there's a coincidental police raid, forcing her to take refuge in a randomly chosen house where, coincidentally, the chap is waiting who wants to whip her away and maroon her on an island lost in a vast archipelago. Undaunted she escapes to another island, which

coincidentally is about to be visited by the erstwhile kidnapper, who coincidentally fails to recognize his victim and falls in love with her instead. And so on: it all has a certain lurching, ramshackle charm.

But it's hard to beat the ingenious plot device of Asimov's *Robots and Empire*, a diabolical gadget which for extremely complicated financial reasons must operate for fully 150 years to make the Earth's surface radioactive. But, enquires a particularly cunning henchman, *suppose somebody turns it off before then?* The moustachio-twirling arch-villain's answer, translated from the pseudoscience, is: "Har har, fear not, I'm putting a padlock on the controls."

I'm glad to report that there were a few fine works amongst all the grot. Indeed, a few of those mentioned above are pretty good despite odd lapses: *Heart of the Comet*, for example, which David Brin keeps telling me was squeezed off this year's Hugo ballot only by the overwhelming popularity of *Black Genesis*. Plenty of inoffensive books haven't been mentioned at all: unfortunately, as that man Amis once put it, long extracts demonstrating inoffensiveness can be wearisome. Or to phrase it another way, it's easy to spot a spider on the wall of a room but very hard to prove the room is spider-free. It's easy to point out evidence that an author has cocked it up—not so easy to convince you that a whole book is not only free of incidental cock-ups but also positively good. Let's just say that the two best books I've read this year are John Crowley's *Aegypt* and Jonathan Carroll's *Bones of the Moon*. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to decide whether you agree.

I don't unfortunately have time to say anything about the really *legendary* bad books which are so bad that they never even got published. American fans apparently pass round a famous yarn called *The Eye of Argon*—the Eye in question being "the jewel protruding from the idol's eye socket, its masterfully cut faucets [*sic*] emitting blinding rays of hypnotizing beauty." Go to the bar, buy a drink for someone who's worked at reading old slushpiles, and they will tell you about the Piers Anthony manuscripts which even Grafton won't print. One of these fabled turkeys is reportedly called *Mercycle*. It is all about mermaids on bicycles. 'Nuff said.

When Conspiracy is over I'll be trudging back to the endless prairie of review copies, where all the plots start to look the same, where all the *titles* start to look the same....one recent parcel contained three fantasies by two different authors sharing the same publisher, and they were called *The Wizards and the Warriors*, *The Wordsmiths and the Warguild* and *The Wizard and the Warlord*, and I moaned and hid them all under the desk. You're all probably feeling just this ghastly sameness after listening to an hour of me—so let's stop.

Thank you all.

NEBULOUS STATISTICS

I have been. Trying to. Improve my style and. Make it. Easier. For you lot to read. Is this any. Better?

Well, several recent articles and press releases have gone on about the virtues of style-checking programs—software that reports on the clarity of your writing. My first paragraph is the result of paying rather too much attention to one of the most popular “readability” tests. In future I will be writing lots more. Easy prose. Like this.

Conversely, would you care to measure your powers of analysis against a real brain-burster of difficult writing? A sentence whose comprehension, according to the best authorities, requires more than 31 years of full-time education? Fasten your strait-jackets, check your MENSA credentials—here it comes!

“That excellent occasion of family celebration was enlivened by elephants, aspirin, carpentry and bananas.”

If that challenge was too hard for you, work up to it by easy stages via the following sentence of the same length—which the same formula calculates as being easier by some 25 years of schooling.

“A sard pyx of lymph and gleet was limned with a quincunx of merkins.”

By contrast, what does the formula make of my first, disjointed paragraph? The answer which is cranked out is that it’s suitable reading for a hitherto uneducated child after approximately one year in school.

It’s time for explanations. The formula I’m using, or misusing, is Robert Gunning’s venerable “FOG index”, the basis of most style checkers. It dates from 1952; the name is an acronym, meaning Frequency Of Gobbledegook.

Working the actual FOG formula involves going through a piece of prose and making some simple counts which cry out to be computerized. You count the number and length of the sentences, and from that work out an average sentence length.

You also calculate the percentage of “hard words” in the total word count, the rule of thumb being that a hard word is anything with three or more syllables which isn’t a proper name (your program should be watching for capital letters), a combination of “easy” words (this eliminates terms like “horse-power” and “superfluid”), or a variant of a word whose basic form is “easy”. “Edit” counts as easy, therefore “editing” is easy. As a writer—no, an originator—I always suspected it.

Finally, add the average sentence length to the hard-word percentage and multiply this sum by 0.4. The result, Gunning being an American, is supposed to give the US school grade at which you should be able to tackle the prose. I’m uneasy about adding two different kinds of number (an amount and a percentage) at the last step, but it seems that the formula tests out pretty well on a practical basis.

How ludicrously it can fall down is shown by

those slightly spurious examples. My opening paragraph has no “hard” words at all and fiddles the sentence-length average by simple defiance of grammar. The “excellent occasion” sentence rates as terrifically obscure since 64% of its words are trisyllables and thus “hard”, even if they don’t look hard to you. And the “sard pyx” fools the rule-of-thumb difficulty gauge with a cluster of short, “easy” obscurities.

Obviously the second and third cock-ups can be partly eliminated by a program with access to some comprehensive dictionary of genuinely easy words. The first is actually more subtle. Breaking up sentences automatically gives a better readability score even when the. Disruption of logical. Flow means. A harder. Read....

This isn’t merely an exercise in poking fun. Style checker programs are loose in the world. I don’t know whether any author who submits text on disk has achieved the dubious privilege of being the first to be rejected unread because “the style program says you’re too highbrow for our median market.” It will come.

Fortunately the checking contains the seeds of its own ruin. I once wrote a spoof fairy tale in which a king, well read in the literature and having to choose between the merits of three princely suitors for his daughter’s hand, decides to cut out the complexities and go straight to the inevitable winner by simply asking which prince is *youngest*. Later it occurs to him that, alas, this point is too well known, and all but the youngest prince will infallibly lie about their age.

Just so, authors may lie about their style, as in my examples above. Gunning’s FOG formula assumes that writers are unspoilt and don’t contort their prose to achieve a “correct” score. Authors with style checkers of their own may soon be cunningly aiming for the exact readability level demanded for the chosen market.

But by this stage, what will “readability” mean? Only that the prose is tailored to get the right score from tests like the FOG index. Some editor is still going to have to toil through the stuff and find out whether, like my second example but unlike my first and third, it really is readable. Back to square one, everyone.

Meanwhile, an outfit called Scandinavian PC Systems is flogging a style checker called READABILITY at £59.80. Is it any good? A rave review appeared in Britain’s *PC* magazine, excitingly illustrated with screen prints of the program at work. As it improves your English, READABILITY can be seen to offer you *choises* (sic), to give an overall *evaluation* (sic), and to report how many short or long words you use *in average*.

Truly, this could be the software that taughted we to write good!

Wearing other hats in other places, I also review science fiction...but I never thought I’d cover an SF

book in this *8000 Plus* column. It's not so much the book as its introduction, which unites two favourite themes: the unreliability of statistics and the often hilarious results of applying machine analysis to our slippery English language.

For an enjoyable if dated look at the first theme, see Darrell Huff's *How To Lie With Statistics* (1954). This covers many classic cock-ups, like the American opinion poll which selected its thousands of victims totally at random from the telephone directory but was still dead wrong about the election. (Phones weren't quite as universal then, and the selection method ruled out hordes of less-well-off voters.)

As for my jaundiced views on how computers look at words...see the earlier column just above.

Here's the book, *The Best of the Nebulas*, edited by Ben Bova. The Nebula awards for SF stories are voted on by members of the SF Writers of America, an organization which anyone can join on the strength of three short published stories. (Yes, Professor, you are well aware of all this, but I am refreshing your memory as though you knew nothing of it, for the benefit of ignorant readers.) They've been presenting these awards since 1965; this is a "best of the best" anthology.

What's perched by my keyboard is an uncorrected proof copy from Tor Books in New York...so before actual publication, some editor might yet remove the points which caused me to say loudly, "Oi!" (But apparently no one did.)

As early as his third introductory sentence, editor Bova gets into trouble. As judged by SFWA, the anthology "contains absolutely the best SF stories published between 1965 and 1985."

Oi! Here's a thought experiment. Imagine that 1980 was a terrifically good year and saw the publication of the best, second-best and third-best short SF stories of 1965-85. Only one could win the award. (We'll assume that it's the best, although short-term log-rolling is rife, and as Bova admits, opinions shift with time.) Then the SFWA members who voted on the contents of this anthology couldn't possibly pick the second- or third-best stories: by our hypothesis they won no Nebula and are excluded, unlike the fourth- and twentieth-best, which *did* win in leaner years.

You might have thought that common sense would at the very least have attacked this problem by throwing open the anthology voting to all stories *shortlisted* for Nebulas in the given period. But no, that's too sensible, and might in addition have produced results embarrassing to authors of less enduring Nebula winners.

Then, how to conduct the actual voting? Bova polled North American SFWA members only, since: "Overseas membership is too small to have a significant effect...."

Oi! Two more thought experiments. One: the British government excludes all "fringe" parties like the Green Party or SDLDDLSP from the next election because they're too small to affect results.

Two: Bova notices that SFWA has only one member in, say, Kansas. Does he exclude Kansas on the same logical ground? Does he hell.

(One reason SFWA overseas recruitment remains small is that members in funny foreign countries like Britain feel they're not considered "real". Bova certainly reinforces this impression. An example from my own experience when a member: SFWA refused to handle a dispute with my publishers, which is supposed to be one of its functions. The UK Society of Authors browbeat said publishers into a cash settlement for crimes in breach of contract.)

Best of all is the description of how all the voting questionnaires were analysed by fantastically sophisticated software which actually...compared the frequencies of the words used!

This sounds suspiciously like the program I wrote years ago and called GREASE in honour of David Lodge's funny novel *Small World* (where similar software plays, as it were, a bit part). I meant it as interesting and maybe illuminating fun; Bova says it's a powerful tool for determining covert opinions and attitudes.

Thus, he points out triumphantly, the words "fiction" and "science" turned up lots of times and were about equally frequent, presumably betraying the "not outwardly expressed" fact that this poll concerned SF. Warming to his theme, he notes that the most frequently used words of all are: "story" and "stories".

The point soon emerges as Bova launches an attack on the artsy-fartsy poseurs who filled in voting forms. These blatant fibbers, he complains, kept banging on about "literary quality", "passing the test of time", and "impact on the field", all elitist attributes of which Bova's own SF is certainly innocent. But the computer saw through this holier-than-thou posing!

For, as Bova reports gleefully, the most frequently used words of all were "good" and "read". At heart the voters spurned the high-flown literit stuff and wanted a *good read*....

Oi!

Here are some questions to ponder.

(1) How come the most frequently used words were also "story" and "stories"?

(2) Might the frequent words "good" and "read" have been paralleled by frequent use of "not", "just" and "a"?

(3) Might "read" have sometimes been a verb?

(4) Aren't there many more ways of phrasing subtler literary virtues than there are of saying "a good read"? For example, mightn't you talk about sheer writing *quality* or *excellence*, and wouldn't the analysis be meaningless—or even more meaningless—unless the word-counts for "quality" and "excellence" were combined?

(5) Are you now surprised to learn that in pursuance of some murky subargument, Bova himself proudly points out that "quality" scored high while

"excellence" came low?

(6) Would you buy a used statistic from Ben Bova?

Probably his conclusions have several grains of truth; but conclusions reached by such shabby reasoning are automatically devalued. Meanwhile, you're extremely lucky this isn't an SF magazine, otherwise now I'd have to go on and review all the collection's actual stories.

AFTERTHOUGHT

Suffice it to say that for lack of room to reprint the novel winners, Bova instead offers little essays on those books; and that to remove all possible bias and ensure trenchantly impartial evaluations, these essays are written by the novels' authors.

L. RON HUBBARD'S FANS OF THE FUTURE is soon to be launched! Learn to do fanzines real good! In short sentences! Learn to spell bhetter! *Sglodion* is proud to print an extract from the coming prospectus:

"If you care about the presentation of your fanzine, you'll want to come. To our punctuation workshop. Not quite sure where to put that? Comma or semicolon? Leave it. To our experts, you may be lacking. In confidence, after just one session you'll never again feel yourself. Paralysed by the distinction between a subordinate clause and a hanging participle, you'll face the fannish pedants. With a cheery smile—never again! Will your carefully-crafted phrases be sabotaged by a random scattering of ill-judged stops? Yes. You will be a master of Punctuation of the Future!"

FUN WITH SENSELESS VIOLENCE

As it says—or ought to say—in the programme, my subject this evening is weaponry and senseless violence, which is why there are quite a lot of you listening in this big hall. If I'd made the mistake of giving a talk with a feeble title like *PEACE IN SCIENCE FICTION*, we'd be much cosier in a much smaller room, all six of us. This is called knowing your market.

Yes, it's a truism that all too much of the science fiction scene is scarred by vast tracts of destruction left in the wake of colossal future armies and space-fleets, all bristling with ultimate doomsday weapons which seem to need as little reloading as those six-guns in the Western movies—you know, the ones that turn out to be at least 256-guns. For this one hour the committee has given us permission to revel in thoughts of global war and military supremacy, before getting back to sober realities of life like the Hugos and the Worldcon site selection.

To help you enrich your own lives with gratuitous science-fictional violence, I promise to give full instructions for building a lethal cold ray, to explain why all Isaac Asimov's robots are shamefully in violation of the First Law of Robotics, to reveal the logical power source behind the galaxy-busting artillery in your favourite space operas, and to mention L. Ron Hubbard.

Last year was a significant anniversary in my own career of senseless violence. It was just about 25 years before that I first strayed into a bookshop and was fascinated by the garish spaceships and death rays on the cover of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. Fortunately I couldn't afford this, and bought a lot of cheap remaindered science fiction instead. My fate was sealed.

The first really bad results of SF obsession showed up in 1979, when, urged on by megalomania, flattery and electric cattle prods, I lost my convention-speech virginity, by giving a talk with the tasteful title "Genocide for Fun and Profit".

This was based on the first book I'd written all by myself, *War in 2080*, full of futuristic military hardware and destined to make an enormous splash in the international remainder market. Although it was supposed to be non-fiction, the book took its inspiration from SF...which is the posh way of saying I ripped off hordes of ideas from my favourite literature. Especially the sort of trigger-happy stuff where every minor skirmish sounds like this extract from my own very early story "Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid":

A nearby galaxy exploded.

And at that fateful signal, each of the arch-fiend Nivek's countless ships and planetary installations discharged the full, awesome power of its primary projectors, the blazing beams of destruction

combining into a hellish flare of starkly incalculable incandescence against which no possible defence might prevail!

Nivek snarled in rage. "Missed...."

You'll be glad to know that this villain is duly brought to book and made to face charges of "multiple genocide, ordinary genocide, genocide with mitigating circumstances, accidental genocide, genocide in self-defence" and many more.

One can't help noticing that fashions in genocide have changed over the years. Most writers are now a little bit more cautious than my mentor Doc Smith, who with schoolboyish enthusiasm used to let his clean-cut heroes wipe out every single member of every unfriendly race, thus ensuring that they wouldn't be tempted to do it again. Whatever it was. Afterwards, the victors could pronounce a simple but touching epitaph, such as "QX! Hot jets and clear ether! In sync to the skillionth of a whillionth of a nanosecond!"

With his very late book *Subspace Encounter*, there were signs that Doc Smith was developing posthumous qualms about all this. One of his characters actually remembers what it said in the Boy Scout Handbook and blurts out, "Genocide is supposed to be reprehensible." Unfortunately, his next word is: "But...."

Of course Britain's very own Robert Lionel Fanthorpe left out the But in his novel (if that's the word I'm groping for) *Power Sphere*. The verb in this book's very last speech has clearly influenced the jargon of the Pentagon: "'And that,' said Salford, with grim irony, 'is how Agent 1117 extincted a rather unpleasant race!'"

L. Ron Hubbard in *Battlefield Earth* rather felt that before wiping out a planetful of gooks and erasing their whole lousy biosphere, one should have some definite moral justification. He therefore made it clear that his fiendish "Psychlos" are aptly named, since they've allowed their brains to be adjusted by those hated cultists called psychiatrists—as opposed to the ideologically sound opposition, based in Los Angeles and East Grinstead.

The Orson Scott Card approach is substantially more humane. Here, after first slaughtering the tastefully named Buggers right down to the very last arthropod, his caring young hero consoles them by feeling, at great length, guilty about it. The resulting depth of emotion brought tears to my nostrils.

Both Joe Haldeman and James White, who are so notoriously nice guys, stop a long way short of this. Their favourite approach is to have it discovered—after only a fractional micro-genocide or so—that there has been a mistake. The original first contact message, saying something like "Greetings, Earthling scum! We come to annihilate you painfully and rape your planet," turns out to be a misprint. After shooting all their interpreters, both sides can live happily ever after.

Nobody could accuse Jack Chalker of being

prejudiced—when he throws a genocide, *everyone's* invited. In the climactic Well World book, he shrewdly covers up his own spot of indiscriminate mass slaughter with a version of the traditional escape clause, "With one bound he was free!" Yes: having blasted the entire universe into a smoking heap of superstring fragments, he has it repaired again before anyone can notice. Well, replaced with a copy actually, but a really good one. Philosophers and TV scriptwriters love this kind of temporary total annihilation, since you can do it every week without spoiling series continuity.

Piers Anthony does something rather similar in *Being a Green Mother*, which admittedly is a fantasy but which deserves a mention here because of its contribution to the very scanty archives of Post-Genocide Dialogue. After the heroine has wiped all life from the Earth in a slightly overstated temper tantrum, we're faced with the burning question of what, precisely, should Mummy say to a daughter who's just obliterated the entire human race? The answer, from the Piers Anthony Book of Etiquette, is: "I think we should talk, dear."

For the sake of fairness I'd like to taunt more British authors, but unfortunately my compatriots rather tend to shirk the important issue of genocide, thanks to something which New York publishers call British gloom. Long before the cheerful interstellar slaughter can begin, your typical British future society has poetically gone down the tubes, owing to famine, plague, floods, triffids and reading too much J. G. Ballard.

I suppose the most worrying authors are those who, claiming to be inspired by the late great Robert Heinlein, explain that their alien heavies just have to be bombed into extinction because there is no choice—because they're the Universe's toughest, meanest, deadliest, most unrelenting critters, who in defence of their twisted, perverse views will fight on, tooth, nail and tentacle, asking no mercy and showing no quarter, so long as a single one survives.

This looks like quite a strong argument until you notice that the same authors tend to praise Man (rarely, for some strange reason, Woman) as the Universe's toughest, meanest, deadliest, most unrelenting critter, who in defence of his noble, idealistic views will fight on, tooth, nail and nuclear handgun, asking no mercy and showing no quarter, so long as a single Jerry Pournelle survives.

One can't help thinking that should a lot of suspicious and technologically superior aliens get their ideas about us from this kind of deeply philosophical science fiction, it could cause some problems in interstellar diplomacy. The message would appear to be: "Hi there, alien weirdos! We're rough, tough, mean, deadly, xenophobic, and will listen to no argument short of racial extinction, ha ha!" This might not be the best way to persuade the Galactic Federation to overlook our terrible social lapse of being (ugh) carbon-based. But, as usual, I digress.

In my rather short career as a weapons physicist in the 70s, I got interested in how all the hardware of interstellar annihilation actually worked...not to mention its terrible side-effects. I have gathered statistical evidence that doomsday machinery capable of taking out more than three planets without reloading has an absolutely devastating and incurable effect on one's prose style.

Here for example is a modest little attack with energy beams, as described in one of the least brilliant SF novels ever published, *The Troglodytes* by "Nal Rafcam". These troglodytes, like the book's readers, are completely speechless; so we don't know the motive behind "their master plan to reduce the world to utter disaster", but this is how they begin:

The speechless ones moved into the camp. Their lethal machines were triggered and like a flash of lightning the whole camp was ablaze from the huts on the rim of the camp right through the camp. Everything was cinerated. Every living person was killed the moment the deadly emissions from the tribe's machinery pierced through the camp's superficial structure. So instantaneous and final were these lethal rays that the destructive act was over in but a few minutes.

Larry Niven has philosophized somewhere about how space drives can make ever such good weapons and vice-versa. This was actually anticipated by our troglodytes, whose spacecraft zooms through the atmosphere driven by two enormous lasers. One is at the back and heats up the air in order to drive the ship forward "much in the fashion of a jet". The other laser points forward and clears the atmosphere away from in front of the craft. To engage full reverse thrust, you need only leave one of these lasers full on while simultaneously not turning off the other.

For some reason this cunningly designed ship fails to work for more than a few pages; it then turns into a badly written fireball and takes all the flying troglodytes with it. As the author mournfully remarks, "No human could have endured the immense heat, let alone super-humans."

I will tactfully not mention the mighty battle lasers described in Fritz Leiber's otherwise jolly good book *The Wanderer*. In particular I am not going to mention the way the beams are luridly visible in space, and even less am I going to mention how they continue to be visible, speeding away to infinity, for several seconds after the firing stops. This is obviously where George Lucas did his research.

I'm not quite certain where Frank Herbert did his, but in *Dune* you can get even more spectacular results with one puny little laser. Here every important person and building is protected by a total defensive shield which repels bullets, missiles and so on. Its one tiny flaw is that if a single unsporting terrorist should fire a single laser bolt at one of these

invincible shields, there's a terrific fusion explosion which utterly destroys the laser, the shield, everything inside the shield, and about forty square miles of real estate. With defences like this, who needs enemies? I don't know about you, but I'd be inclined to leave my shield turned off and just risk the odd bullet or missile.

So much for laser shields. That reminds me that for particle beams in real life, the Earth's own magnetic field is a big problem, since it makes them bend in a rather limp and Freudian way. In the 70s some weapons physicists hit on the idea of firing *uncharged* particles which wouldn't swerve in Earth's field. Since neutral particles are bloody hard to accelerate, the cunning plan was to use protons and hire someone to attach electrons to them as they left the accelerator's muzzle at close to the speed of light. The only other thing I remember about this wondrous scheme is its nickname, "Sipapu"—supposedly an old American Indian word meaning neutral hydrogen beam weapon.

I think the most *economical* particle gun of all time must be the one Charles Harness invented for his story "The New Reality". This gadget fires exactly one photon. A carefully angled prism then places this single photon in a dreadful quantum dilemma, where it has to make an awkward decision with no chance of hiding in the statistics.

According to the author, the poor thing's only choice is to vanish in a fit of embarrassment. Since this naturally wrecks the law of conservation of energy, the side-effect of Harness's single-shot photon gun is to destroy the universe. Luckily his hero falls through the hole into a nice new creation and can start saying the usual things like, "And I shall call you...Eve!"

As a change from all those coruscating beams of hot stuff, SF writers have always had a sneaking fondness for cold rays too. I never understood how these worked until I found the scientific explanation in a 1930 story by Bob Shaw's favourite author, Captain S. P. Meek. Since you can focus a beam of light or heat through a lens, the obvious trick is to put a big thick piece of cardboard in front of your heat source and let the lens focus the resulting *absence* of heat into a searing pinpoint of spine-chilling cold.

"Even at two miles," says the Captain's wicked scientist, "I could produce a local temperature of three hundred degrees below zero." (Fahrenheit. I hope.)

The marvellous thing about this cold projector is that, just as with John W. Campbell's Hieronymous Machine, you can cut production costs by leaving out most of the parts...such as the heat source we started with. The pocket version is merely a powerful lens with insulation sprayed on one side. No batteries needed, and never again will you run out of ice at parties.

My own variant of this astounding piece of super-science involves a multi-kilowatt audio

amplifier which takes its input from a very high quality earplug. (Two earplugs for the stereo version.) The hugely amplified lack of sound produces a deafening blare of silence which could really mess up enemy communications for miles around, and would enormously improve the Worldcon business meeting. Which reminds me that it was the famous 18th-century wit Sydney Smith who said, of Ian Watson, "He has occasional flashes of silence that make his conversation perfectly delightful."

Just because I'm a physics chauvinist, I shouldn't overlook exciting biological handguns like the Delling in *Whirlpool of Stars* by "Tully Zetford" (who we are not supposed to know is really Britain's very own Ken Bulmer). A Delling appears to be a precision-engineered water pistol filled with some horrid goo distilled from the remnants of convention room parties. In a half-hearted attempt at the Lionel Fanthorpe thesaurus record, Zetford tells us with subtle understatement what happens when this is fired at you.

Giffler melted.

His body deliquesced. It oozed. His head flowed and collapsed and sloughed. Still upright, he melted and shrank and collapsed, his body shimmered like a blood-drenched jelly. He shrank and oozed and formed a contracting pool of scum on the yard stones.

The man in black, Goton Telander, walked out of the Custom House door. He still held the Delling. With a finicky motion he flicked his fingers and the electronic and neural circuits whipped the gun back up his sleeve. It had all been so very slow and yet so very quick.

Giffler had been destroyed....

A robot vacuum cleaner and scrubber darted out on rubber wheels and began to suck and clean the spot where Giffler had died.

Good old hotel room service; they never give up.

The oldest form of biological warfare consists of poisoning wells, or forcing visitors to drink British hotel coffee. An exciting new slant on this technique comes from the fantasy novel I've already mentioned, by an author who had better remain nameless but lives in Florida. The book's very wonderful and enlightened heroine exerts her special powers and detects that there is indeed something objectively wrong with a village water supply. I quote: "Anyone who drank in it would be sickened, and clothes washed in it would remain unclean. The soul of the water reeked of its special pollution." In a powerful and moving feminist statement, we then learn why. The buried water-main had been walked over by...a woman. No comment. Absolutely no comment.

Appalling biological weaponry usually works a bit less quickly than that: you know, the alien enemy infiltrates us and arranges over a long, long period to addict hordes of people to sinister pleasures which are so hard to give up that [cough] the addicts won't [cough cough] stop even when told it's [cough cough hack spit cough] killing them. Addictive pleasures like, for example, science fiction conventions.

The idea of slowly-acting weapons brings me at once to Isaac Asimov, who these days is unable to write a sentence like "He was instantaneously disintegrated in a puff of smoke" without expanding the action into several long chapters, full of explanatory dialogue, visits to the toilet, and new additions to the Laws of Robotics.

What Asimov has failed to reveal in all his books is that positronic robots themselves are a long-term weapon against humanity. His feeble excuses for the lack of robots by the time of the Foundation series merely show that he's part of the cover-up, and evidently in the pay of that malevolent alien consortium known to Earthlings as the editorial board of Doubleday. The truth is that robots were banned by the Galactic Empire because they were too dangerous.

Asimov gives the game away in his first few robot stories. The positronic robot brain operates, we are told, by the internal creation and annihilation of—surprise!—positrons. When positron meets electron, the annihilation energy is in fact over a million electron volts, producing a burst of hard gamma radiation. Inside one of these positronic supercomputers, this must be happening billions and billions of times per second, with gammas and X rays spraying out like nuclear halitosis. Obviously it's extremely hazardous to stand anywhere near a robot...especially when it's thinking.

This is confirmed by Asimov's own novels and their descriptions of his most robot-infested planet of all, a place called Solaria, where (a) there are hardly any flesh-and-blood people left, while (b) the few survivors eventually become genetically weird and grow funny lumps on their heads. It all hangs together, you see.

But, you are asking yourselves—those of you who aren't snoring or wondering who this Isaac Asimov is—but surely my analysis is totally demolished by the other well-known fact that hard radiation causes Asimovian robot brains to seize up so fast as to leave no time even for a traditional chorus of "Daisy, Daisy..."? If robots already spew out gamma rays, how can this be? I will tell you. Control yourselves.

High-energy gammas from an external source will produce random electron-positron pairs as they pass through matter. These will appear in the robot mind as wrong and illogical thoughts from outside, such as an irrational desire to write a trilogy containing more than three volumes. Of course the robot itself can detect this malfunction and intelligently deduces the whole scenario I've just

explained, intelligently realizes it's been leaking harmful rays in defiance of the First Law all its life, and as a result, intelligently suffers immediate brain death. Which, just like the best-seller lists, demonstrates again that intelligence *doesn't* have much survival value.

Now of course a *real* SF hero or heroine would never stoop to pointing gamma sources at defenceless robots. This is no way to deal with a villainous artificial intelligence which has just gone insane and announced, "Yes, *now* there is an L. Ron Hubbard!" Instead, traditionalists have a choice of three ecologically sound disposal methods which do not consume fossil fuels, or lead to hazardous waste. The only objection is that outside the glorious pages of science fiction, they may not always work.

Method one involves logical subtlety. The mighty-thewed, pin-headed SF hero cries, "Accept input: everything I say is false!" The world-dominating electronic brain can only reply *Fzzzt crackle crackle*, and seizes up with its display showing the final, defiant message, "Please contact your hardware dealer." Other good questions to blow the minds of computers are, "Why is a raven like a writing desk?", "What is the sound of one waldo clapping?" and "Do you realize I haven't backed up my data this week?"

Method two is not easy to distinguish from method one, and consists of the Very Dumb Question. Thus Patrick McGoochan in *The Prisoner* painfully typed in the word "Why?" and totally destroyed a hyperintelligent computer complex which might reasonably have come right back with "Why not?" Or: "Because."

Method three is sensitive and emotional, with the heroine placing one defiant hand on her brass bra to declaim, "There are limits to your power, Machine! You cannot love...or weep." Whereupon the mad computer's only remaining option is to die of embarrassment.

Of course, in science fiction, these low-budget weapons consisting of pure information are also popular for use against people. I suspect that writers—pallid, flabby and inept creatures that they are—like them because they're easy to lift and require little skill to aim. The idea is that this deadly data, once it gets into your mind, will cause you to fall over twitching, bleeding from the eyeballs and frothing at every orifice, like a very young fan who's just read his first William Gibson story.

These infant fans all seem to think that the notion of brain-bursting information—"concepts that the mind cannot stomach"—was invented by Gibson in the 1980s. Just to show off my superior erudition, I can't resist pointing out the weird coincidence that it cropped up twice in October 1969, with the appearance of two similar works, Piers Anthony's *Macroscope* and the first episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Remember the sketch about the funniest joke in the world, which no one can hear and live? The German version supposedly goes: *Wenn is*

*das Nunstück git und Slotermeyer? Ja! ...Beiherhund das Oder die Flipperwaldt gersput.*¹ Not many people know this is a quotation from Wittgenstein and translates as, "Whereof we cannot speak, thereon we must remain aaaaaaaaargh."

Anyway, British SF pundits go on about how Fred Hoyle used the idea of unthinkable information years before, in *The Black Cloud*, 1957, and really offensive nitpickers like myself remind them that the world's funniest and deadliest joke features in a poem by that famous American, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in 1894 died laughing.

Which is what I nearly did when I read about the methods of the arch-villain in Charles Sheffield's recent "hard science fiction" novel *Proteus Unbound*. This fiend has the unsocial habit of driving his potential enemies insane, by mercilessly beaming them animated pictures of himself dancing backwards in red tights. Talk about psychological warfare.

All these non-macho software weapons sound too much like magic spells to the true fan of hard science fiction, who insists that stories be based on rigorous extrapolation from known scientific facts about antigravity, faster-than-lightcraft, instantaneous communication, infinity generators and time travel....

For example, people were quite cruel to Bob Shaw for his astrophysical cover-up in *The Ragged Astronauts*. Just as you're fretting that the twin planets sharing a common atmosphere can't possibly work, Bob cunningly inserts a mention that this is, er, another universe, where *pi* happens to be exactly three. In other words, anyone wanting to prove the set-up is impossible must first ask Bob for the value of the gravitational constant in these foreign parts. The reply is always: "It's defined as whatever makes my solar system work."

I pointed out if you decide like this to make your own rules, it seems entirely reasonable that this different universe will also have its own special grammar, syntax and spelling, so that the publishers could save a fortune in proofreading. Mr Shaw's reply was not printable, but by the end of the third book (*The Fugitive Worlds*) the use of an intergalactic mega-weapon has changed the value of *pi* to...about three and one-seventh. You can imagine people talking around scratching their heads and muttering, "That circle looks a different shape somehow."

Funnily enough, no one seems to protest half as much when writers dream up space drives that change another important constant by furtively pushing our universe's maximum speed limit up towards infinity. And not many authors have picked up on the very useful implication that if *c* approaches infinity and Einstein's dear old $E=mc^2$ still works, you get an awful lot more output from a nuclear reaction. I mean, the fusion of one hydrogen atom could provide all the energy you need to zoom right round the universe detonating suns and wrecking galaxies, and there'd still be an infinite surplus which would have to be either stored in infinitely many batteries or converted back to a single subatomic

particle.

I assume that this kind of rigidly scientific power source is what makes AKKA work. AKKA, you might possibly remember, is the plot-saving gadget from Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space*, which when all else fails can be hauled out of your sleeve to destroy entire invading spacefleets, plus any odd moons and planets that stray into the line of fire. It's conveniently portable, it needs no batteries, all the parts can be bought from Radio Shack except for the bits of wood, and I've always been impressed by the luck of the inventor who first stumbled on this world-wrecking principle and just happened not to be pointing it at anyone, or at the earth, or the moon, or the stars....

Similarly, the eponymous plot device of Barrington J. Bayley's *The Zen Gun* (1983) is carved from rough wood and does not require ammunition, but on one of its more interesting settings will detonate suns at three light years' range by projecting a murderous blast of pseudoscience (based on the sometimes disputed theory that gravity is not a pull but a push). By way of safety catch, this apocalyptic facility can be used only by a trained Zen master who is too enlightened actually to use it.

My favourite device with no visible power supply appears in David Duncan's *Occam's Razor*, where an eccentric mathematician scores high marks for style by announcing, "Gentlemen, we are about to short-circuit the Universe!" It's a slight anticlimax when the fabric of space/time is rent asunder, and the world's nuclear arsenals disabled, by a collection of wire frames supporting films of aqueous solution—or in lay language, soap bubbles.

This is all because of topology, which was just making its first shy appearance as an explanation for everything in SF. Previous explanations for everything included atoms, rays, radium, magnetism, mesmerism, and General Semantics: invoking one of these magic names automatically meant that you didn't have to explain any more. Of course new catch-phrases still arrive every year or so. 1950s futures were full of people taking cooling drinks of heavy water. Later on they did their hair in gravity waves, and today's SF characters can't so much as tie up a parcel without resorting to superstrings. Not to mention burying their dead in a supersymmetry.

(I once planned a trend-setting story to be called "Cyberfractal Wetware meets Gödel's Infinite Black Hole Designer Psychosis in the Quantum Gutter"; but I found it had already been written...by almost everybody.)

One of these current hot subjects is chaos theory, which was particularly brilliantly not predicted in the SF novels of Colin Kapp. These are fabled for grandiose weaponry and conspicuous consumption. *The Patterns of Chaos*, for example, has a plot device which will make your forebrain bulge with galactic concepts until the sense of wonder comes spurting from your ears. See, there are all these planet-wrecking hellburner bombs which have

been travelling between galaxies for an awesome seven hundred million years, and they're aimed at the hero. In a subtle refinement of suspense which would have brought tears to the eyes of Henry James, they keep just missing...but going off closer and closer. One of them in fact misses the hero by less than one metre. Well, as the author reluctantly explains, one metre and 16.1 hours.

All this is as nothing to the super-artillery of Kapp's follow-up *The Chaos Weapon*. This massive device projects devastating bolts of pure entropy, so vicious and irresistible that they could...they could turn Hal Clement and Arthur C. Clarke into 1960s New Wave writers, or even cyberpunks. With power like that, it will come as no surprise that the Chaos Weapon has to be fed with an ammunition belt of suns, while its hellish beam is focused by a ring of ten black holes. Things certainly look bad for the hero when he gets hit by its full output.

Fortunately it's only a glancing blow...which merely bounces his spaceship (I quote) "against the elastic walls of the continuum itself". I love this traditional SF picture of the fabric of space as a kind of rubberized canvas which an enterprising art thief could cut right out of its metrical frame.

Bouncing off it does lead to some sticky problems: to quote Kapp again, "the ship was not circumventing the light barrier but had become enmeshed in it." But our hero soon makes a comeback and proves the worth of the indomitable human spirit by diving out of the airlock with another planet-wrecking hellburner bomb "clasped under one arm"—and the Chaos Weapon is put out of commission faster than you could say "contracted word-length".

It was that book that made me realize again why it can be almost soothing to read violent space operas full of megaweaponry and exploding planets. In more than 92% of cases, by careful use of outrageously lousy physics and a level of literary craftsmanship which makes the physics look quite good, the authors manage to convince us that these universe-busting arsenals could never conceivably work.

This thought comforted me in my years of working for the British Ministry of Defence under the terrible shadow of fear that nuclear weapons would be dropped. Our lab technicians were so clumsy that the most likely place for one to be dropped was on my foot.

I think that's about enough senseless violence for one programme item, but I'd like to leave you with a cheering thought about science fiction and its uplifting moral effects. Although pundits keep claiming that porno potboilers and splatter movies excite their fans into real-life acts of imitation, I'm glad to report that despite a lifetime of violent SF I have never once disintegrated a hostile galaxy, or used a huge gamma laser to blow up the sun, or even wiped out a single measly planet in a multi-gigaton antimatter blast. Not once.

And I hope that everyone in today's SF community, with the possible exception of Greg Bear, can say the same.

Thank you.

1. Yes, I *know*, the quotation is "joke German" and only funny to the British. I cravenly substituted the following sentence at the Dutch Worldcon: "Luckily, the Pythons only gave us a suspicious German version which was a seething mass of umlauts and sauerkraut, totally impossible for me to pronounce."

ORYCON 11: Many fans are expecting a report on our free trip to Seattle and Portland as guest of this ace convention. Er, real soon now, maybe.

One surprise was finding that the Cult of R. L. Fanthorpe is big in those parts. Readings from the Master's works are regular events, while the Portland literati (take a bow, Paul Wrigley and Debbie Cross) have somehow located our civilization's most fantastic and unexpected artifacts, in the shape of *R. L. Fanthorpe hardback reissues*. I didn't believe this either. They proved it by giving me two.

Another tradition which persists there is the Light Bulb Joke, long thought defunct. Not so. "How many pre-Socratic philosophers does it take to change a light bulb?" asked Jerry Kaufman. "One, plus a half, plus a quarter, plus an eighth...."

Suddenly they were all looking at me. I was a guest and had to be witty. Prose rhythms from a recent reading throbbed in my mind. "Er, how many Fanthorpe pseudonyms does it take to change a light bulb, to replace it, to reinstate it, to substitute for it, to exchange it, to swap it, to put another in its stead, to...?"

Fortunately no one stayed around for an answer.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

One neglected literary form, as *Interzone* knows, is the covering letter you send with your deathless manuscript. Thanks to industrial spies, I've secured several examples familiar to editors all over the world, and especially in Brighton. The challenge is to detect the subtle reason why in each case the recipient reached for his or her trusty rejection slip without finishing the covering note, let alone starting the manuscript. Match your wits against the professionals!

Dear Editor,

What you're waiting for is a new idea to shake up the fuddy-duddy world of science fiction. Well here it is! Based on the mindbogglingly innovative concept of Earth being struck by a giant alien meteor with startling results, my novel *Lucifer's Footfall: The Forge of Shiva* is....

Dear Sir,

I see you publish science articles, so you'll love my enclosed poem *The Joy of Superstring Theory*, a true epic in nineteen thousand heroic couplets. Also, it is allegorical too, Mrs Gilbey of our village Literary Circle thought it was VERY INTERESTING and I know you will not need no more recommendation....

Sir,

I cannot reveal my blockbuster plot to you as yet, since you would steal it and have it published under some house name by one of your tame hacks, thereby defrauding me of millions. I am on to the little games of you so-called "publishers". Before submitting the outline I want a firm contract guaranteeing a seven-figure advance and 110% of gross film rights. For the present I am not revealing my address—attempts to trace me and steal my notes will be useless. Kindly reply via the classified advertisement columns of....

Attention: Editor,

Revelations chap. xiii clearly shows us the clue. We know it takes Halley's Comet 76 years to complete one orbit but are you aware that if you add 2000 AD to Archbishop Ussher's 4004 BC and divide the total by 76 it goes exactly 79 times? Since 1990 is actually the year 2000 this shows that the Second Coming will occur on 12 July. My manuscript conclusively proves....

Dear Mega-Ed,

I was having this totally ace game of *Bludgeons and Blackguards* with my friend Irving when we realized the excitement of our role-playing campaign would make an incredibly triff novel! So here, based on that month of fun, is *Lepermage of Elfspasm*, a brill fantasy dekalogy in which a lovable crew of

Elves, Dwarves, Cats, Boggits, Men and a token Voluptuous Nymph go up against the Cold Dark Dread Force of Chaos Blood Death Evil, which....

Darling Editor,

I saw your picture in *The Bookseller* and at once knew we would become very close friends! I am 19 and very experienced. Perhaps we could have lunch together. Or breakfast. Of course I will be quite delighted to buy the meal! (Don't you love champagne?) Here is my photograph for you to keep. To fall in love sight unseen—it's like something from a mediaeval romance, isn't it? Speaking of which, I know you'd like a peep at the enclosed MS of my richly romantic historical novel, *I Was Edward II's Teenage Groupie*....

Hi, Editorperson,

There's never been a novel like this! Imagine the excitement of a plotline in which all the past Dr Who's meet up with Darth Vader, Superman, Gandalf, Marvin the Paranoid Android, Indiana Jones, Crocodile Dundee, Captain Kirk and Spock, Snoopy, Judge Dredd, Roger Rabbit, James Bond, E.T., Mickey Mouse, Rambo and Jimmy Swaggart! I am sure a big outfit like yours will have no trouble sorting out copyright problems, and then....

Dear Idiotr,

Plees find enclosed my novvle, it is handwrote Im afraid but you will not Mind this becuase GENIEUS cant be mistakken can it? No retern post enclosed sinse this will nott be nessary as you will See....

Dear Sir or Madam,

The MS herewith is a *very first draft*. I could change almost anything on request. For example, in the slave bondage orgy scenes I am open to suggestions (your knowledge must be so much greater than mine). Just say the word and I'll alter the lard to cod liver oil, or the protagonist's name to—well, it's a teensy bit obvious, should we tone it down to Steelram or Goatfetish? Also there are details about bestial fellation which need checking in the light of your mature experience. I'm willing to take advice on any point. Just send a fully detailed letter of instruction and comment, and....

Editor, dear Editor,

Ever heard how George Orwell's best novels were bounced by several major publishers before they got to be international best-sellers? Well, history repeats itself, and my enclosed *Big Brother Farm* has actually been rejected by *exactly the same* wilfully blind publishing outfits as Orwell's. To add to the astonishing coincidence, I have chest trouble just like him. Knowing all this, can you afford to take the chance of not....

Dear Skiffy Editor,

This is a guaranteed SF best-seller—you don't even need to read it! My change of name will assure its success. I have the legal documents all ready to fill in: the final decision is yours. Do you prefer Isaac Amizov, Alfred C. Clarke or Roberta Heinlein? I had also thought of H. G. Welks, but do not think this would be such a good seller....

To Whom It May Concern:

Not merely a work of high entertainment—my novel is *more*. Here in fictional guise are the truly shocking *facts* about the *conspiracy* of scientists, theologians and armed librarians who *control* us. Intentionally I have given over six chapters to *exposing* the jealously guarded truth about *gravity* alone—not a pull as *Communism* would have you believe, but a *push*! Unless you too are blind to reason or controlled by *laser signals* broadcast from *Chinese UFOs*, you cannot fail to....

Dear Gagged Lackey of the Thatcherite Junta,

Your lickspittle rag won't dare publish this, but....

You see, of course, the common fault in all these? Not one of them addresses the editor correctly, as "O Mighty Being From Whose Fundament The Illumination Of The World Proceeds".

TAILPIECE. The usual credits to the editors who kicked me into producing these pieces. All copyright © Dave Langford, 1987, 1988, 1989. The exhausted Langford is now going off to get some sleep, as it is written:

"The city slept. Men slept. Women slept. Children slept. Dogs and cats slept...." (*March of the Robots*, "Leo Brett", 1961.)

"He slept the sleep of the tired, he slept the sleep of the weary, he slept the sleep of the exhausted, for he was tired, and weary and exhausted." (*Negative Minus*, R. L. Fanthorpe, 1963.)

"The author shot himself after bringing forth this monstrosity, didn't he?" (Robert Chambers, *The King in Yellow*, 1895.)

THE DRAGONHIKER'S GUIDE TO BATTLEFIELD COVENANT AT DUNE'S EDGE: ODYSSEY TWO

In the past, when I've given talks at cons they've been on humorous subjects, like fandom, or the royalties I get for my books, or the destruction of human civilization as we know it. I've avoided the hideous realities of our present-day world, such as science fiction.

All this changed in 1983 when I sold out to the big publishing tycoons and started writing an SF review column for *White Dwarf*, the magazine of fantasy games and Harlan Ellison. Each month I got a handsome two-figure sum (I'm not saying where the decimal point goes) and was privileged to gobble enough monthly reading matter to be recycled into the New Forest, a consummation devoutly to be wished. After the first half year I had a new insight into the name *White Dwarf*: my brain had collapsed to a tiny fraction of its former size, and looked ready to go out like a light. The work's like a mental counterpart of that interesting zoo job, unblocking constipated elephants by hand (you have to reach all the way in). All that kept me going was an invigorating shower of hate mail from the fourteen-and-a-half-year-old Dungeons and Dragons fans who were the magazine's chief audience, and who regarded the works of Stephen R. Donaldson as sacred texts to be spoken of with awestruck reverence and kept far apart from commonplace books...a point with which I actually agreed.

Speaking of Donaldson, I've just been looking into his thriller published under the impenetrable pseudonym Reed Stephens: *The Man Who Killed His Brother*, now a major remainder! The private-eye hero has Donaldson's own version of those snappy names like James Bond or Mike Hammer—he's called Axbrewder, Mick Axbrewder, and he's bowed down with a massive weight of remorse and guilt, and instead of being a leper he's an alcoholic. Instead of thinking *leper outcast unclean* in italics on every third page, he thinks to himself, in italics, *you need a drink you need a drink you need a drink*. This must be the effect of Donaldson's discovery of SF conventions. Down these mean off-licences a man must go....

Fortunately I didn't have to review *The Man Who Killed His Brother*, but over the last year or two there've been plenty of other review books which after about five pages set me muttering (in italics) *you need a drink you need a drink you need a drink*. Each new piece of really ropey SF leaves a new scar on the forebrain—if late at night you see me mumbling and falling over, it's not what you think, just the sea air causing twinges in my old Piers Anthony wound. (Incidentally, in British fan circles the old phrase "as thick as two short planks" is being replaced by "thick as a Piers Anthony trilogy"—or in

extreme cases, "as a Piers Anthony protagonist".)

Thanks to these scars I can't forget the real cesspits from my years of SF/fantasy reviewing, and I don't see why you shouldn't suffer too. As a select committee of one, I'm going to announce my shortlist for the newly created SF Superglue Awards—for the books that stick in your mind although you wish they wouldn't. Plenty of awards for the best of this and that will be presented this weekend: but we should remember Sturgeon's Law and give due honour to that 90% comprising the silent majority. This is known as democracy.

My first award, then, comes in the hard-fought category of Forgettability, and the trophy is a lavish thousand dollars' worth of interstellar vacuum imported at colossal expense and sealed in an old peanut packet. (I forget where I've put the trophy just now.) The book which most sticks in my memory for being unmemorable is Isaac Asimov's *Foundation's Edge*. This goes on for hundreds and thousands of words which contain less actual plot than one of those little 40-page segments in volume one of the trilogy. Vast wordage is expended in a self-indulgent effort to tie all Asimov's novels into a single Future History, despite the fact that the Foundation set just isn't compatible with the robot books. Mating them together is like trying to cross a prize bloodhound with Gibbon's *Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire*. No amount of guff about robot separatism can account for the total lack of even the crudest domestic robots by the time of the Galactic Empire.

When I finally woke up at the far side of *Edge* I found the essential message went further, and was that Seldon's Plan was all wet, so the entire preceding trilogy was therefore a complete waste of time. Having taken two hundred thousand words to say this, Asimov appears to be keeping the next revelations for a sequel in case readers are overwhelmed and overexcited by this headlong pace. In my *Dwarf* column I ended up quoting Kenneth Tynan's famous line: "The trouble with reviewing commodities like this is that you know in advance that, for all the effect it will have, you might as well fill your column with a relief map of Death Valley."

It's only fair to admit that the next Asimov, *The Robots of Dawn*, was quite a bit better: "Here," I remember saying, "is a writer who shows promise and may one day make a name for himself." *Dawn* is specially recommended for setting a new record in SF for the number of meticulously described scenes in which the hero visits the toilet. I mean, Kim Kinnison never went at all, and I shudder to think what happened to Lensfans who tried to imitate *all* their hero's little idiosyncrasies.

Our second award category covers the traditional literary qualities of Style, Imagery and Diction. Since the Seacon '84 progris repots are disqualified as amateur publications, there is absolutely no contest and the winner has to be Stephen R. Donaldson, for *White Gold Wielder*. This book concludes a trilogy with an almost memorable plot,

going more or less as follows:

Lovable leper THOMAS COVENANT wishes to remove a BLIGHT from the fantasy LAND but is told by evil and evocatively named LORD FOUL that in attempting to serve the ends of the Land he will in fact be serving the diabolical ends of Lord Foul, which is why Covenant goes about actively not serving the ends of the Land on the theory that this will therefore cause him not to serve the ends of Lord Foul, little realizing that (further complicated by the efforts of cuddly LINDEN AVERY to serve none of the ends of Covenant, Foul or Linden Avery) this attempt to indirectly serve the ends of the Land will in fact...et cetera, et cetera. All this gets so deviously complex, the book should have been called *Tinker, Tailor, Leper, Spy*. No wonder even the author and Lord Foul are hopelessly confused by the end of the book, with Donaldson having to cover his tracks by inventing and invoking the useful Rule 42—which states that if omniscient Lord Foul and his all-potent forces of cosmic evil should win, they automatically lose.

However, I'm awarding Donaldson his laurels on the grounds of style. He uses these triffic metaphors: Covenant passes the time "sucking the wounded places of his heart," which I'm told makes you go blind, and certainly our hero soon develops that interesting symptom, "a gelid knot in his chest."

Donaldson is still pillaging the same bizarre dictionary already used to thicken the narrative of five fat books. Something isn't just thrown but "hurled like a jerid". A person doesn't just ramble on but is "anile as the dead", which doesn't mean what you think. Best new words this time around are "preterite" and "argute", as in "he made his preterite way" somewhere, while "her preterite self-consciousness held her back". Likewise Covenant's face—his "gaunt, compulsory visage", in striking contrast to those of us whose faces are optional—tends to be "argute with concentration." Sometimes the whole damn situation gets "so argute that it was almost physical."

After you've cut your teeth on these elementary puzzlers, you'll be ready to try and decipher the meaning of my two favourites: "beneficent mansuetude" and "analystic refulgence". Only advanced students of Donaldsonese should tackle the inscrutable lines exhumed from *The Wounded Land* by Joseph (for it is he!) Nicholas:

They were featureless and telic, like
lambent gangrene. They looked horribly
like children.

Now I don't object to increasing my word power: Gene Wolfe in *The Book of the New Sun* and (to some extent) Brian Aldiss in his *Helliconia* things sneak in a number of exotic words, but with the context arranged where necessary to make it clear what's meant. Donaldson, conversely, has the knack of defusing his big scenes—distracting your attention by sandbagging you with his dictionary, so that rather than being held enthralled the sensitive, cultured

reader is apt to remark, "What the fuck's he on about?"

(This was the sentiment inspiring a favourite *Ansible* colophon, which went, *inter alia*: "*Ansible* 32 is argute with analystic refulgence and beneficent mansuetude; it makes its preterite way to you, hurled like a jerid from the gaunt, compulsory visage of Dave Langford, whose unambergripped malison may be aneled by rushing gelid pound notes. Shining like cynosures for their aid are [various helpers]. There are no prizes for guessing which doorstep fantasy blockbuster your editor has recently quaffed like a sapid draught of clinquant roborant whose fulvous surquedry and caducity make knurrs come from the vocabulary out....")

For his achievement Mr Donaldson receives a *Collins Pocket Gem Dictionary*, on the strict understanding that he gets rid of the one he's using now.

Award number three is presented to the book with the most diabolical plot. The trophy takes the form of a dragon exquisitely sculptured from saccharine. Er, yes, you're already ahead of me....Let me just say that once upon a time I rather liked *Dragonflight* and its sequel. The melodrama creaked a bit, maybe, but the swashes were tidily buckled and the guaranteed boilerplate tear-jerker situations (Mills & Boon, prop.) performed to specification. It was a guilty pleasure to be enjoyed far from the austere eyes of Joe Nicholas, John Clute and other shock-troops of the higher Lit Crit.

The years went by, Anne McCaffrey became ever more gooey about her invented world (like Dorothy Sayers with Lord Peter Wimsey, who by the final books is so damned noble, sensitive, caring, encyclopaedically erudite and generally wonderful that one kept expecting and hoping for him to be snatched off to heaven in a fiery chariot). The Dragonbooks and their titles grew inexorably longer. Six hundred thousand words later—it says in the foreword—we have *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern*, which I tried to like but without success.

One problem is that Pern and its dragons have been worn pretty smooth. We know all about the dragonweys, a sort of cross between Gormenghast and Heathrow Airport from which flying beasties rise to polish off unpleasant falling spores (Thread) with their fiery halitosis. We know that dragonriders and civilians will each be unchangingly competent, staunch, cowardly, noble, wrongheaded or wry, depending on the cut of their cardboard. We know the gimmicks of human/dragon telepathy, dragon teleportation, time-travel via dragon, excessive dragon cuteness, and the rest. We know with a deadly certainty that there's no escape from McCaffrey's recurrent ooh-aah scene in which boy or girl meets dragon via "Impression", combining the emotions of first communion, first sex and the dread initiation rite of the Secret Fourth Form Gang all in one hygienic package.

In a brave attempt at freshness, *Moreta* is set

900 years prior to *Dragonflight*, filling us with excitement at the truly remarkable lack of change in Pern society over this period. The main difference appears to be that in ye olden days people have *even sillier* names, leading to lots of paragraphs like this:

"Sharth, Melath, Odioth," B'lerion closed a finger into his palm with each name. "Nabeth, as you suspected. Ponteth and Bidorth. That makes seven, and if my memory serves me, N'mool, Bidorth's rider, comes from Telgar Upper Plains. Of course T'grel's not the only rider who's dissatisfied with M'tani's leadership. I told you, didn't I, Falga, that once those Telgar riders had a taste of *real* leadership, there'd be trouble." He smiled winningly at Moreta. "I actually defer to Sh'gall's abilities...."

It's not so much the ugliness of these bloody apostrophes spraying saliva all over the page, or the difficulty of having tragic heroine Moreta sound tragically heroic when stuck with lines like "Orlith says you've done a good job, A'dan...You were marvellous assistants, M'barak, D'tan, B'greal!" What's wrong is that, hopelessly in love with her gift for thinking up daft names, McCaffrey is wasting time dishing out labels and (what passes for) characterization to an immense horde of walk-ons and spear-carriers who in the leaner prose of *Dragonflight* would rightly have been "a dragonrider", "a drudge", "a telephone sanitizer" or whatever. The "Dragondex"—yuck—at the end of this book lists 145 characters' names. Too many.

Skip the next bit if you'd rather not know the plot. Hide under your chairs, stop your ears, roll on the ground in convulsions (just as I did when I read the book)—here it comes! The foreordained conclusion is that Moreta snuffs it on her famous Ride as chronicled in story and song as early as 1968. Following contact with Pern's forgotten South Continent, an influenza pandemic rages, leaving one to wonder why another doesn't rage 900 years later when similar contact is made in *Dragonflight*. About halfway through the book, a Masterhealer dimly recollects that back at Healer School he was taught the now forgotten secrets of vaccination. Duly he collects the convalescents' blood, drawn into a carefully sterilized syringe through an interestingly unsterilized hollow thorn; has it centrifuged ("Desdra... began to swing the jar around her head"—I swear I'm not making this up); and uses the resulting vaccine on all and sundry. I was looking forward to the scene in which the Healers then find a mouldering *Encyclopaedia Britannica* amid their archives and read about the perils of serum hepatitis—"transmitted usually by injection, as in blood transfusions...a common hazard." No such luck.

OK. Everyone is vaccinated. But the dreaded 'flu will strike again unless everyone is revaccinated

in short order! And there's a hollow thorn shortage! And for unexplained reasons a hollow thorn can be used only once! Luckily dragons can time-travel, so Moreta and entourage instantly nip forward to the next hollow-thorn harvest. This apparently pointless plot turn serves three purposes. Firstly, it restores the beloved dragons to their usual position at stage centre, which was in danger of being usurped by Pernese paramedics. Secondly, it establishes that dragonriders can pop into the future for a nice long rest (with optional tasteful sex), returning immensely refreshed: a point of some importance to the later unbelievability of the plot. Thirdly, it poses the fascinating question of how this extremely useful time-travel ability, which in these olden days is a widely known plot device which young dragonriders are apt to stumble on by accident, should be completely forgotten over the next few centuries, ready for dramatic rediscovery in *Dragonflight*. No credible answer ever emerges.

(By the way, McCaffrey cocks up another back-reference to *Dragonflight*. As you'll remember, you dedicated skiffy readers, you...that book had some stuff about olden-day lady dragonriders with flamethrowers, and 900 years after *Moreta* it's suggested for the first time that "agenothree" spray is better than flame for Thread-zapping. In *Moreta*, ye olde flamethrowers' tanks are now said to be filled with agenothree, i.e. HNO₃, i.e. nitric acid. Not the most likely of flammable fuels.)

Moreta now has to be set up for her Ride. For reasons which are not particularly clear, the great revaccination has to happen to everybody on the same day, necessitating huge logistical efforts by vaccine-loaded dragons. For reasons which are wholly opaque, one boss dragonrider refuses to do his bit. (He's the latest in a long line of McCaffrey characters whose motivations are utterly mysterious because the author needs a baddie but can't *imagine* why anyone should be nasty to her favourite people.) And for reasons of plot, only heroic Moreta and a chum can perform that last desperate vaccine run, in which she over-fatigues herself and—well, yes, quite, pass the onion.

I felt almost sorry for poor Moreta, not so much because of her heroic self-sacrifice (as indicated in her own recent experience, the silly woman could have paused at any time for ten hours' sleep or ten days' vacation, and time-jumped back to carry on refreshed from the same instant) as because of the vast auctorial thumb pushing her so crudely to her doom. It's something of an achievement, when you stop and think about it—to shuffle an entire *continent* full of teleporting, time-travelling dragonfolk out of the way, leaving our doomed heroine as the Only Possible Person to complete a task requiring approximately the same skills as a milk round.

(Another glitch. Great play is made in *Dragonflight* with the famous "Ballad of Moreta's Ride", whose throbblingly significant chorus is all about black dust and freezing air—something to do

with Threads falling to dust when it's cold enough. In *Moreta*, not only is there no reference whatever to black dust, but the celebrated Ride appears to take place after sowing time in a mild Spring. "Never mind the facts," I imagine the Masterharper saying. "The public always likes a catchy chorus about black dust....")

Luckily *Moreta's* tragedy is not allowed to leave everyone depressed. Within five pages, the entire supporting cast is saying spontaneous things like, "I must think of the beginnings of this day. Not of the endings!" and cooing over the sugary delight of that unescapable Hatching and Impression. I could hear the distant strains of violin music, I could feel myself wafted on a tide of saccharine to the nearest toilet, into which I stared for quite some time, meditating on such timeless questions as "They banned cyclamates but not this?"

Onward! It's time to encourage new talent with an award for a new young author who has—in several senses—brought fresh blood to the stuffy old scene of British SF, with his novel *Habitation One*. If I remember the hype correctly, Frederick Dunstan wrote this when he was only eight, but I assure you the literary style is worthy of an eleven-year-old. An eleven-year-old who's borrowed a volume or two of Stephen Donaldson's dictionary. His award comes in the category of Good Taste, and the shape of the coveted trophy is—in the immortal words of James Branch Cabell—not convenient to describe.

The book is an everyday tale of post-holocaust folk going mad and mutilating each aboard *Habitation One*, a future environment so wondrous that auctorial efforts to describe it collapse in adjectival gibbering. "Enormous—incredible—incomprehensible," gasps Dunstan, overcome by his command of big words. "Superb, colossal, brilliant," he continues. "Amazing, astounding, analog..." but here I almost begin to exaggerate. (All right: the original actually says "Amazing, symmetrical, fantastically balanced...") After pages of this stuff the only thing clear about *Habitation One* is that it has "filamentary stanchions." Your guess is as good as mine.

When not engaged in mayhem, the everyday cardboard folk make speeches telling each other things they already know, a plot device known in the 30s as "filling in the background", and more recently as "filling in the background very ineptly." Stir in the fruits of dictionary research, and the result is heady prose indeed: "You know that we—that I—founded the Scribaceous and Anagnostic Society some years ago because...." etc. This, though, is not a book to be read for its literary excellence, which is just as well. The joy lies in savouring the rich psychopathology of the author's imagination. Let me, by way of example, tell you about the booby-trap.

Character A, a lady, walks into this booby-trap. The trap was set by character B in hope of catching character C, merely because C has driven B mad by threatening to shoot arrows into his goolies. C did this by way of tactful reproach after B, his

advances having been spurned by another young lady D, was so coarse as to present D with exploding shoes which blew her feet off. Is that clear? There's a lot more on similar lines, so let's return to the woman A, who walks through a door and gets hit by a massive falling axe-blade which slices off chunks of her: a wisp of hair, a scatter of toes, a slice of hip and most of a breast. (When I told Bob Shaw about this he was bemused to realize that he'd never before spotted the pun contained in the word "booby-trap".)

Rallying after a brief stay in hospital, A flips her lid and wanders around shooting people, preferably pregnant women who can gorily miscarry, nursing women so the same bullet can kill the mother and the child at her breast, etc. After a bit A breaks a leg and lingers for some while in hideous agony from multiple fractures, being saved just in time to be publicly executed—dumped in the evocatively named Looney Bin whence no victim ever returns. A returns, though, posthumously, the author being in need of a female corpse for the big necrophilia scene in which C fails to notice that he's enjoying his own dead wife. That is, he does notice what's happening but doesn't realize she's dead. Afterwards, another typical, meaning totally demented, character (it's our old friend B again) starts humping—sorry! starts lugging the by now somewhat eroded body about the landscape for reasons even *he* doesn't understand. Little does he know that he's but a puppet in the hands of the author, who fancies a nice smelly cadaver for next chapter's big cannibalism scene....

I was also struck by the limpid boy-meets-girl vignette in which true love dawns as C helps D try on her first wooden leg; the martial-arts thrill of B's giant spiked yo-yo with which someone's chest is "minced off"; and the hilarious torture sequence featuring someone else's foot-long moustache being ripped out with hydraulic jacks. This no longer moustachioed chap—call him E—gets his moment of glory at the book's climax, when for completely obscure reasons an evil loony (as opposed to the ordinary common-or-garden loonies who make up the bulk of the cast) is suspended by a rope high in the air, grinning wickedly, laughing ha-ha, and clutching a small nuclear device with which he plans to destroy the entire plot. What a dilemma!

Luckily there is this *other* public execution gadget, consisting of a gigantic steam-powered catapult which bashes people into the air with such violence as to pulverize them from the waist down, disposing of the results by pitching the body over the edge of the world. Rather like a primitive, one-way version of TAFF. E, our man of the torn-off moustache, goes in for glorious self-immolation by having this catapult smack him skyward. Converted from the waist down to bolognese sauce, he just happens to retain consciousness. And faster than a speeding Concorde, he hurtles past the bomb-wielding loony who dangles on high, and fires an arrow at him, and hits him. Naturally the evil-doer then drops his midget nuke: with remarkable co-

ordination E catches it and takes it with him, on to his big-bang finale somewhere beyond the edge of the world.

This may sound silly to you. It sounds even sillier in the book, which has added attractions like grotesquely bad writing. In fact it even seems silly to the author, who adds a cringingly sententious epilogue in which one of the nicer characters (C) *explains* that the events of the last chapter vary between highly implausible, completely unbelievable, and downright bloody impossible. *Therefore* the inscrutable hand of God must have been at work, and we should all go down on our knees! This is the first book I've met which tries to pass the buck for bad plotting to God.

Comparison with God's previously published work suggests rather strongly that on the contrary, this frightful effort is entirely the responsibility of Frederick Dunstan. In the words of famous BSFA reviewer Sue Thomason, "Please do not buy this book, even to read on trains."

My final Worst in SF award is the biggie, for Scientific Plausibility, and it takes the form of a rusty Möbius strip rivetted to a polypropylene urn containing the ashes of a complete run of *Analog*. In fact our winner could have made a good showing in any of the previous categories—in a single virtuoso performance the author achieves thicker padding than *Foundation's Edge*, mangles the English language more worser than Stephen R. Donaldson, beats Anne McCaffrey hands-down for remorseless use of clichés thought slightly stale by Mary Shelley, and even approaches *Habitation One* in the difficult arena of Good Taste. Let's hear a big friendly round of applause for our all-star winner, an 819-page opusculum which does for SF what the Rev. Jim Jones did for soft drinks—*Battlefield Earth* by L. Ron Hubbard!

Now I must admit that *Battlefield Earth* is a book with something for everyone, all the way across the cultural scale from people who need doorstops to people who want to start bonfires. For example, Scots will be delighted to learn that in the year 3000 all Scots are heavily into kilts, tartans, clans, claymores and the parodic stage-Scots accent which raised such titters in 19th-century issues of *Punch*. Likewise, Hubbard's keen insight reveals the Chinese to be inscrutable, and very subtle and cunning and diplomatic, and flowery in speech, and addicted to rich Oriental robes: one gathers that in this world, Chinese Communism never happened. Neither did feminism—the strongest and most prominent of the few female characters achieves absolutely nothing beyond bursting occasionally into tears ("It was as though he had taken a board from an irrigation trough; the tears went down her cheeks"), and she spends most of the book locked in a cage being gloated over by a fiendish alien baddie. Need I add that the only good aliens are dead or offstage ones?

You get the idea. In 3000 AD, by some mysterious alchemy, every aspect of life, character,

dialogue, action and you-name-it conforms in exact detail to the worst clichés of the 1930s pulps, the stuff that makes Doc Smith look like Tolstoy. Take that alien villain's subtle characterization: "He went to sleep gloating over how clever he was." (The characterization of the aforementioned female consists in the two details "black eyes" and "cornsilk hair", repeated again and again without mercy in the apparent hope that sooner or later they'll evoke something.) Savour the richly realized future slang: "You're as crazy as a nebula of crap." "How the crap nebula would I know?" etc. And one of my favourite lines for general style and panache: after Terl the deviously clever Psychlo baddie has spent several minutes watching our Earthling hero turn blue in the murky Psychlo atmosphere, we have "He suddenly got it. The man-thing couldn't breathe breathe-gas."

There is really no time for a guided tour round the major stylistic awfulnesses of *Battlefield Earth*: I'll just mention that that lyric sentence about the man-thing and the breathe-gas figures in the anthology of specially good bits selected and circulated by the book's own publicity agents. The whole farrago has been written, or thrown together, using all the devices of short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, repetition and general flatulence from the days when pulp writers were paid by the line. Indeed, any thrifty pulp editor would have trimmed the book by about three-quarters without sacrificing anything important. (Personally I could trim it 100% or more without sacrificing anything important, but that's just one fan's opinion.) I only managed to finish it by borrowing a spare office at my publishers' and leaving myself trapped with nothing else to do for a whole wet London afternoon. Even then, I kept wanting to rush out and bite the pigeons, or scour nearby gutters for an improving cigarette-packet to read.

We'll concentrate on the more astounding bits of super-science, since LRH is particularly proud of them. His introduction explains how he always wrote real SF, featuring real science and real people—adding that John W. Campbell couldn't get the good stuff any more when LRH stopped writing for him. Campbell had to publish hack serials with no characters in them, *Dune* and things like that. Anyway, according to this same introduction, *Battlefield Earth* is real SF. None of your implausible fantasy nonsense. So I've picked out a few specially inspiring items of plausible skiffy/science which the publicity crew might care to include in their *next* Best of *BE* selection. (In fact I've just noticed to my surprise that at least four of them are visible or implicit in the existing publicity pack....)

One. Savour this, physics fans: the alien Psychlos have a different periodic table containing different elements.

Two. Their world's entire atmosphere explodes into radioactive gas at the merest touch of uranium! I now offer a small prize to anyone who can devise a plausible composition for said atmosphere, and who

can also explain how Psychlos who breathe this muck can walk around on Earth wearing only facemasks.

Three. It just happens that their "instantaneous conceptual knowledge transmitter", designed by yet another extraterrestrial race for use with the wholly alien Psychlo brain, also works on humans. This is slightly more surprising than finding your video recorder will play 78s....

Four. Psychlos build really good, tough armour-plate. "Here was a mark where an atomic bomb had hit it."

Five. Moving to biology, there's a great scene in which someone dissects a Psychlo and looks at the bits through an old-fashioned optical microscope. "Their structure isn't cellular," he cries at once. "Viral! Yes. Viral!" In the course of the next few paragraphs this chap, though limited to home-workshop technology, has completely mapped the Psychlo nervous system using a multimeter and a couple of test prods. It works like this: "The Psychlo moved its left foot. 'Good,' said McKendrick, 'I have found the nerve that relays walk commands.' He put a little tag on the nerve." By the way, although Hubbard manages not to preach his personal religion overtly, this scene ties into some digs at his old hate—psychiatrists. It seems that the fantastically cunning Psychlo psychs rewired the brains of the entire race (except females, who of course don't count) to instil the Protestant Work Ethic. But, meddling with things which Psychlos were not meant to know, they got it wrong and made them all vicious sadists instead. This is why it's morally admirable for the book's hero, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, to wipe out the whole goddam lot.

Six. Connoisseurs of bad SF will already have recognized the exploding Psychlo atmosphere as a plot device which will allow Jonnie to snuff an entire planet without working up a sweat: genocide made simple. He simply teleports a stack of nuclear weapons to planet Psychlo—little knowing that there's a force screen around the receiving bay! So what happens is that the first doomsday bomb goes off, converting everything within that screen to a seething radioactive hell resembling a Worldcon bidding party—and the force screen holds! (Cf. point 4. As traditional SF pseudoscience, the screen has a kind of common-law plausibility which nuke-resistant armour plate lacks.) Dramatic pause, mounting tension. Then the second bomb, *which was sitting right next to the first*, goes off! Then the third...fourth...fifth...and if anyone hasn't spotted something slightly *wrong* with this scenario they must be very thick, or L. Ron Hubbard, or both.

Seven. Those were ordinary Earth-type nukes, the sort Mrs Thatcher uses for personal stimulation. Psychlos have something much jollier, the Ultimate Bomb—which, believe me or believe me not, consists of a little box containing hinged rods and levers. One is duly let off, reducing an entire moon in slow motion to a cloud of electrons and nuclei. You might think that whopping electrostatic forces would make

said electrons and nuclei join up again pretty damn quick? Hubbard seems dimly aware of this. What he says is that the huge electric charge will cause mighty lightning bolts to shoot out and zap spacecraft which come too close. Think about that, but not too hard.

Eight. You know about electrolysis—ions flowing through solutions and all that. Now let the complacent mandarins of the fuddy-duddy scientific Establishment reel at...Hubbard Electrolysis! In this stunning new development, *molecules* flow along a *wire*. Yes, you can stick a probe into a bit of shrapnel lodged in someone's arm, connect a battery, and through the magic of Hubbard electrolysis the lump of shrapnel will emerge from the other end of the wire.

Nine—and the last one. If you've seen the inflatable (and as many have found, deflatable) Psychlo used to promote this epic, you'll have noticed that Psychlos have five talons on one hand, six on the other. Thus they count to base 11. Thus their mathematics is—we learn—very, very difficult for non-Psychlos to follow. According to Hubbard, no matter how many fingers you have, the decimal system is the easiest for everyone in the universe. "Whenever they discover [the decimal system] on some planet they engrave the discoverer's name among the heroes." Lucky Earthfolk, having ten fingers all along!

"Aha," you say, although I hope you don't, "this is mere nitpicking of a jolly good traditional SF adventure." No. *Battlefield Earth* is crass through and through, bad and shoddy in every joint, hinge and detail. To find these notably amusing howlers I had to wade through 819 pages of the worst SF writing to be found since R. Lionel Fanthorpe got religion and packed it in. These, I maintain, were the good bits, and you can do yourself a favour by avoiding the rest. And this dross, this literary coprolite, is being hyped on prime-time TV even as I write....At this climactic point I intended to bang the table, shout lots of very libellous things and ritually set fire to my review copy of *Battlefield Earth*: but the hotel manager says I mustn't. Of the twenty pages of fiery epithets I had all prepared, the only one to pass the libel-checking squad is: "Not as good as *Foundation's Edge*."

This would normally be the time for questions from the floor, but the committee has kindly allowed me, instead, to use the next five minutes for a head start on the bands of thugs shortly to be hired by outraged authors. I shall be spending the rest of this convention hiding on the Continent, impenetrably disguised in a false beard (borrowed from John Brunner and slightly too small for me) and a false beer-gut (slightly too large and borrowed from Martin Hoare). The "Dave Langford" you see in the bars this weekend will be a simulacrum programmed to drink inhuman quantities of Bass and pretend total ignorance of any hideous insults in the past hour.

Meanwhile, as Marty Feldman used approximately to say: if anyone out there happens to be

called Asimov, Donaldson, McCaffrey, Dunstan or Hubbard, well, ha ha, I was only joking, of course. If not—I meant every word.

AFTERTHINKS

I expected a savage backlash after this, but got off fairly lightly. Nobody defended Asimov. One fan felt it wrong to mock Donaldson's ludicrous ineptitude with the English language, arguing that many of his words could be located in a large enough dictionary, and that some of the quoted phrases then began to make partial sense, so what was I bitching about? The same person could see nothing wrong with Dunstan's "filamentary stanchions". (A stanchion supports from below while a filament...do I really have to go into this?) McCaffrey fans were much more annoyed, but tended to concentrate on minor quibbles (incidentally, I did *not* say that one was likely to find hepatitis bugs growing wild on hollow-thorn bushes): a few sentences have been rephrased to clarify such points. Fred Harris of Author Services, the Hubbard publicity outfit, cheered me up by remarking "We thought of suing you but you haven't any money." George Hay informed the world without apparent irony that Hubbard had done SF a great service by making it accessible to the semi-literate. I've noticed a rearguard action by Hubbard devotees who, finding *Battlefield* indefensible as straight SF, insist it's a hilarious satire—apparently on the strength of one minor character called Arsebogger. Suffice it to say that my list of cited funnies does not produce a high level of hilarity when spread over 819 glacially paced pages.

No, I haven't steeled myself to read the new, posthumous Hubbard blockbuster which is said to be an intentional satire (with L. Ron's long personal introduction explaining how he is the culmination of a millennial tradition beginning with lesser satirists like Horace and Juvenal). The same UK publicity crew was at work, picking out and quoting highlights whose bubbling satirical wit would make the book irresistible. Judge for yourself:

The (bleeped) fool was still smiling, thinking he had won.

I lunged. Ten inches of steel went through his heart.

Abrupt surprise shot into his eyes. And the knowledge he was dead.

I yanked the knife back, stepping aside. The blade inside him turned into three parts. Guts and a gush of blood rushed out of him, splatting on the floor.

He went in it face down....

UNTRUE NAMES

"You know, there's one thing I really dislike about Vonda McIntyre," said a critically austere friend.

As is my acute way in these literary conversations, I said "Oh?"

"That story, 'Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand'... a *beautiful* title, all evocative, conjures up a whole landscape. And then you read the thing and Mist and Grass and Sand are just three bloody snakes."

This was possibly an extreme reaction, but quick as a flash I bounced back with my own example, a tale by Keith Laumer whose title "Greylorn" set you up for slightly overblown Tragic Romanticism, all gooey with *Liebestod* and dying falls. It certainly didn't foreshadow the actual zippy yarn about a hard-bitten Captain Greylorn who sprinted around shooting people with needle-guns.

Years later the frustration came back to me, diluted, when I read Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*. Clearly a schismatrix was a lady who caused schisms, and I waited half the book for her to turn up and assume her major role: it was then explained that in future parlance the Solar System was a *matrix* of *schisms*, geddit? Pull the other one, Bruce.

Names are objects of power, just as Ursula Le Guin says in the Earthsea books, and the SF/fantasy writer has to get them right. (Le Guin has the critically annoying habit of almost always doing so.) Unfortunately, getting it right in fiction tends to involve more than simple, well, *correctness*. Many times in the carnage of writers' workshops I've heard the plaint, "But that's an actual *incident* from real life, it really *happened* that way, you can't call it unconvincing!" Nevertheless, in the story context, it was: and so the real thing didn't work. Life imitates Art but not very well.

Failure in naming doesn't necessarily jar so immediately: the cloud of disbelief which used to permeate pulp SF nomenclature had negative (or nameless) causes. Every character of the fifth-millennium society, no matter how American, would sport a perfectly reasonable English forename and surname. Sometimes daring authors might include a Continental scientist or Irish policeman: but early explorers of things to come never quite managed that cosmopolitan mix of names found in the contents lists of the pulp mags themselves. I have seen the future, the message went, and it is called Smith, Jones and Brown!

At the other extreme come the wholly invented names. Some could be genuinely poetic (Jack Vance's *The Anome* features an enigmatic character named Ifness); others were by Isaac Asimov. Altim Thool, Dee Sub Wun, Limmar Ponyets, Loara Broos Porin, Loodun Antyok, Noys Lambent, Poly Verisof, Theremon 762, Tomor Zammo! There was no lack of inventiveness (Altim Thool? Ultima Thule? H'mm), but even in my early teens I occasionally felt there was a lack of something.

The something was of course a feel for

language. This is where it gets interesting, because when you try to make names consistent with some imaginary linguistics of a far-past, far-future or just far-fetched scenario, you need to be not only bilingual but crosslingual. The Icelandic parliament is called the Thing, and sounds just marginally silly to English ears: it's the equivalent in language of the real-life incident which is unsafe for use in fiction.

And indeed, Tolkien the super-linguist has a character somewhere called Thingol. By my reckoning (all admittedly very subjective), that's just on the safe side of the borderline: not quite silly-sounding. "Real" languages often evoke discordant echoes in English, like the German street-sign "Fahrtgasse". An invented name has more strenuous responsibilities: the "that's just the way it is" argument develops cracks when you've made it all up. Tolkien must have been thinking along these lines when he modified my favourite elf-name from an early draft (see his posthumous *Book Of Lost Laundry Lists*), a name which no doubt was impeccably constructed on consistent linguistic grounds: Tinfang Warble. A bit more subtle was Gildor Inglorion, which as the name of a triflically wondrous and noble character sounds just a smidgeon...inglorious?

This apparently didn't bother Barbara Hambly, who nicked the name in barely rearranged form for a wizard of her own: Ingold Inglorion, no less. Which reminds me of the old SF naming convention whereby every futuristic word ends with "on", possibly as a side-effect of particle physics. You know, the kind of SF world where drinking-places and ballot papers are now called baryons and electrons....A trenchant example comes in a recent fantasy from Guy Gavriel Kay, with a character called Aileron. Kay says he's a High King but I know he's just an aeroplane's wing-flap. (The same author also has a minor character called Tandem—borrowed, I suppose, from some past epic cycle.)

The improbably placed apostrophe is another favourite ploy in invented names, a major influence being A'nne M'cCaffrey...though the technique could have evolved from the now partly discredited theory that mere aliens wouldn't have the Earthly ingenuity and know-how to invent vowels. "The *grnskn* swigged *scchwsk* from its/her/their *hpflsk* and hefted the deadly superscience weapon known as a *tmhwk*...."

I have nothing against the humble apostrophe (though its intensive use can give the impression that spittle is spraying from the page. Do skiffy writers mean it to be a glottal stop, a click, a period of respectful silence, or what?). Some of my best friends use apostrophes. But too often they illustrate the perils of falling so in love with your own terminology as to lose track of how bloody ugly it looks in English. There has to be something wrong when you can perpetrate straight-faced snatches of dialogue like McCaffrey's "L'vin, W'ter and H'grave attended both Gathers. I've recommended M'gent." Or "K'dren says she's mating with T'grel, and *he's*

determined against M'tani now." Or, outside quotes, "K'lon recognized S'peren and F'neldril..." Or....

Back in the world of pronounceability, E. E. Smith managed an extreme version of the "English echo" problem in his Lensman series, by naming a planet "Alsakan". I hope our friendly typesetters got that right, because Smith's UK publishers had a lot of trouble: inevitably, every other mention of the blasted place came out as "Alaskan". Since its apparent sole export was "Alsakan tobacco", it might have been more prudent to call it "Vriginia".

What makes a good name is outside the scope of this brief article, meaning of course that I haven't the faintest idea. Bob Shaw once related the long anguish of conceiving a fictional character name whose resonances would imply everything there was to know about the person, including his or her past, present and future, not to mention the entire plot of the novel in question, which therefore no longer needed to be written. R. A. Lafferty wrote a story in which spacegoing frontier scouts took names like Manbreaker Crag and Gutboy Barrelhouse to reinforce their rough, tough images, and there was little hope for the odd man out called Ceran Swicegood. This doesn't work so well for serious fiction unless you yourself happen to be called Lafferty, or John Bunyan. Being even subtly obvious can produce loud clanging noises: another Shaw story (*Orbitsville Departure*) features omnipotent alien universe-farmers, a good old skiffy concept which I could live with if it weren't for their Marvel Comics name. It's just too much when ultimate beings are called Ultans.

Bad names are easier to spot than good ones. The trick is to stand back and look at them from the viewpoint of an intelligent reader who knows only English (or whatever language you're writing in) and is not only ignorant of but deeply uninterested in the linguistic roots you've been tending so carefully with potting compost. A sudden rush of insight may save you at this point...or of course it may not: the normally insightful Jack Vance didn't know enough about British idioms to avoid titling a book *Servants of the Wankh*. If you're reading this at a convention and feel baffled, break the ice by enquiring loudly of any British fan.

Popular TAFF winners Patrick & Teresa Nielsen Hayden displayed remarkable resource by dividing up the expected duties of transatlantic visitors: he nobly attended to the consumption of much native beer, and she as nobly did the falling over.

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Very early in their productive lives, fans learn that convention reports can be infused with remarkable cool and street credibility by avoiding such mundane topics as the convention. Staying in the bar and overhearing gossip is merely the first twist of the focussing wheel which will eventually provide that totally original and unpredictable view of the proceedings. To dwell at length on Petri-dish breakfast food and Krakatoa bowel movements is always innovative and worthwhile; but true masters of the form will be careful to fill most of their report with minute descriptions of How I Got There and, if appropriate, How I Got Back Home. This is the approved formula for witty and individual reportage, as used by all the best practitioners. Six million fanwriters can't be wrong.

It's thus embarrassing to realize that virtually the only memories I brought back from Follycon last Easter involved the journey home. (Pause for standard excuse about total euphoria during the con itself, meant not so much to be believed as to avert destroying lightning bolts from Follycon committee folk too numerous to mention but largely called Alison.)

Ah, that endless Monday-afternoon rail journey. Geoff Ryman had a reserved seat but was too nice to kick out the dear little white-haired lady pretending with great thespian ineptitude to be asleep therein.

"No," Mr Ryman said nobly, "I'll slum with you lot in steerage."

We found seats, and Geoff leaned back in languorous anticipation of a long snooze after staying up all Sunday night, and the padded back of the seat fell irrevocably off. Behind was a lethal-looking cluster of edged metal brackets and mediaeval pointy bits. It was a bad train for tall fans, Geoff sitting sternly bolt-upright for the whole trip while Dermot Dobson, unable to do likewise because of injuries on the spinal frontier, groaningly paced the aisle and at set intervals rolled up his shirt to show off the surgical corset. This was on the whole less revolting than Martin Hoare's very similar gesture, repeated through the weekend, which allowed you to relish the interesting stigmata of his chicken-pox. A sickly lot, fandom.

Much later in 1988 I laid the groundwork for a heavily travel-oriented con report by attending the World Fantasy Convention in short bursts via commuter train—a grave mistake, not least because it reminded me of the Follycon incident so embarrassing and repercussive that I didn't want to sign my name to any account of it....

THE BOTTOM LINE

It was a convention, Jim, but not as we know it. I was braced for the fact that World Fantasy Convention really means World Horror Convention, but not wholly for the further translation to World Horror Professionals' Trade Fair For People With Expense Accounts.

Penetrating this event was an act more frustrating than it might sound, since the West London Ramada Hotel's front wall had this long row of glass doors, all offering delusive glimpses of Ian Watson drinking beer and all, as it eventually turned out, locked.... In the bar I found Bob Shaw, who piteously cried "A fan!" and babbled awhile of eldritch hotel prices beyond the grasp of sanity. In the book room, Greg Pickersgill was brewing blasphemous, unspeakable theories, which he then spoke, of convention profitability at fifty quid a head and whose pockets he thought were being lined. (I cannot believe his horrid insinuation that this high-turnover professional event doesn't publish accounts.) Terry Pratchett related with glee how he, Bob and Harry Harrison had requested beer to fuel them for a panel, only for the Gopher In Charge to explain it was soft drinks only because, "We're trying to make a profit, you know." It must have been the huge influx of famous American authors and publishers which made everyone go on, and on, about money.

Soon I saw the bright side of this, when famous American publisher Dave Hartwell lured me off for lunch. At last the gray train had stopped at my station. Yes, he and Kathryn Cramer wanted to commission a major piece for...*The New York Review of SF*? Sure enough, Mr Hartwell was exercising his vestigial fan credentials, and even permitted me to pay for my own food.

Returning from this spree, I was nobbled by evil Harry Harrison, who lured me with beer from the straight and narrow path, sat me with spurious friendliness at his side, and conveyed via his usual genial mix of spittle and animal impressions the words, "I've always wanted to make this introduction, Dave!" From across the table came a slow voice saying, "I've read your reviews of me," and I gazed into the argute visage of Stephen R. Donaldson. It is merely to be recorded that my heart did before too long resume its beating.

Free wine kept appearing in an endless succession of sponsored parties, clearly a good thing were it not that I missed all the later and more debauched ones through having to run for my train exactly as London SF fandom moved in for large-scale gatecrashing. The first time I looked into the main programme, it was full of a mass autograph session hampered just slightly by the shortage of mere credulous fans to beg

the autographs. (A scheduled reading by six *Interzone* stalwarts was later dropped at the discovery that the audience was outnumbered by, well, six to one.)

Next time I noticed the programme, an extraordinary mid-afternoon banquet plus awards ceremony was in progress—allegedly the highlight of the convention. Its actual £20-a-head food was reputedly invested with all the bowel-churning terrors perfected by the Union of Hotel Caterers; the cruellest rumour concerned a table mix-up which led to three mere fans, possibly the only persons present who'd actually paid for the meal themselves, being bumped from their places in mid-hors d'oeuvres. I believe the committee gave them some alcoholic compensation, but Charlie Brown and Andy Porter were later beset with suggestions for striking headlines based on the fact that one of these unfortunates was called Stephen King. Lots of people won awards; the Ramsey Campbell Award (as the British Fantasy trophy is affectionately known) went to Ramsey Campbell, and Karl Edward Wagner walked out in strong hysterics because—if I interpreted him correctly—David Hartwell had given too many awards to David Hartwell.

In some ways it was probably a good trade fair, replete with luxury, freebies, influential business contacts and smoke-filled rooms. A mere change of name might eliminate the bewilderment and recriminations arising from the fact that many fans understand something slightly different by the word "convention". On my final, empty-pocketed journey home (note the traditional demands of this classic literary form) I was saved from rail-borne dehydration only by the solicitude of Diana Wynne Jones, who will be getting another rave review shortly.

The Plain People of Fandom: Is that all? What about the ever so embarrassing bit you mentioned?

Myself: Rats. I was hoping you'd forgotten that.

THE STATE OF THE ART

Despite my age and dignity I'm still not immune from totally cretinous actions, and Follycon saw one of my regular lapses. Given three tons of grubby papers to sign for contributors' and editors' copies of the Steve Jones/Kim Newman *100 Best Horror Novels* anthology of fave raves from the grave, I drunkenly allowed myself to be led astray by the wiles of Ramsey Campbell's daughter. The woman tempted me and I did sign, adding an extra L. Ron Hubbard on this sheet, a spurious H. P. Lovecraft on that....Reader, be warned that such momentary follies can make life bad for a long, long time.

After a terrific wiggling from S. Jones, I managed to blot my crime from memory. (OK, I'm not wholly bad, I did offer to locate sufficient contributors to the book who had sufficient compassion and/or sense of humour to accept copies with signed endpapers "defaced" by the abominable Langford.) Guilt surged up all over again at the rumour—gleefully passed on via the Malcolm Edwards transatlantic gossip line—that Harlan Ellison himself was going to kill me for this. Guilt geysered from my ears at the news that the surplus multi-signed copies were to be sold to idiot collectors at one hundred bloody pounds. "Suddenly," as Steve wrote to me in an otherwise fairly forgiving letter, "it doesn't seem so funny any more, does it?" Er, no, squire.

The book was much in evidence at the Fantasycon, though with Grafton-like acumen the publishers had made actual copies hard to find—limited to specimens of the amazing super special expensive edition which turned up at a late-night launch party while I was on a train, and faded again at the light of day. The party saw the great alleged Pickersgill/Pringle Purloining Project, eagerly related by Steve and Kim to everyone who would listen: "They tried to nick books costing £100 each" is one story, and "You expect the books lying round at a launch party to be freebies" is the other.

Next day I had a glimpse of Neil Gaiman's copy, and was furtively relieved to find that late authors like M. R. James and Robert E. Howard had also signed—officially—via astral rubber stamp; while my own acts of folly were as nothing to the inadvertence of those who'd signed too near the edge and run into trimming trouble (half a Brian Aldiss here, two outlying loops of an otherwise missing signature there, like dismembered relics of who knows what foul crime). And what was this rumour that Ramsey Campbell Himself had succumbed once or twice to the same loathsome temptation as me? Or that...but let's not be contentious, since the recriminations are now past.

Thus my embarrassing confession for this issue. I still cringe a little at the memory of those fraught months between Easter and Hallowe'en. Reader, know that promiscuous forgery leads to no good, and desist!

(Signed)

Claude Degler.

ENDLESS LOOPS

"Software," said Charles Platt in menacing tones, "is a disease. Never get into software, Dave."

I laughed. They laughed when I sat at the keyboard, but then I started to hack the operating system. There comes a turning point in life when with horror you find yourself thinking, `If (DayOfWeek = Thursday) and (DayOfMonth in [15..21]) then DoBSFAMeeting; ...with a semicolon`. It is a bad sign when you end sentences with semicolons.

The program counter clicked to the next instruction. `If BSFAMeeting and (Month = January) and FoolishPromiseToPaulKincaid[November] then OhShit;`

I was a featured speaker. I had been writing nothing but software for a solid month, and my brain was firmly embedded in one of those spaces that Bill Gibson writes about but never, never visits. I ported myself along a British Rail communications interface to the Paddington data terminal and...stop that...got to the celebrated BSFA pub. Buzzing fragments of indexing routines were milling behind my eyes before I'd so much as touched a drop, while before my eyes was Gamma, who had touched a drop.

"Accept data," this SF landmark seemed to say. "I am now Barrington J. Bayley's literary agent. Data entry terminates." He fell over.

Unreality error in central processor, I thought. Some ideas are too perfect and appropriate to be spoiled like this by coming true.

"What's happening tonight?" "I think it's a slide show." "What?" "The barman said." "No, Langford's talking." "Oh, him." "What about?"

"Himself. As usual," interposed Greg Pickersgill.

Thinks: If I open my mouth, all that will come out is 64 kilobytes of hex core dump and error messages.

"Slide show...?" "Gosh, they've arranged the chairs in rows for us. They never did that for the BoSFA before." "Langford's going to...."

"Who are you lot?" said the new arrival with the slide projector, before anyone could ask him to renew his membership.

"You didn't confirm your booking," added an implacable barman shortly afterwards, logic centres firmly locked against unauthorized tampering. Had he taken massive bribes from slide-show organizers? No, once again it seemed that a committee person had faithfully followed the traditional BSFA algorithm of `If AllSeemsWell then Repeat DoNothing until CockUp;`

Over the ensuing squabble came doomy Pickersgillian rumbles of "THIS IS SHABBY! THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION!"

I huddled in a corner, trying to scrape semicolons from the ends of my thoughts and wondering if I was going to be let off. But Gamma was slurring into a telephone with the resource and acumen which has made him what he is today (i.e. a man whose income is 10% of poverty-stricken Barry Bayley's). In mere minutes, powerful data compression routines had squeezed the entire meeting into the legendary Troy Club.

This, as will emerge, was all too appropriate. A venue resembling the Black Hole of Calcutta though less airy and wholesome, the Troy Club is best known as the site of innumerable launch parties for Brosnan/Kettle collaborations called things like *Spew* and *Secretions*. "You should join," secreted Gamma, fondling a representative of the management. "All sorts of SF people are members. Terry Pratchett, and, er, me...and there's Terry Pratchett, and whatisname who writes those Discworld books, and, and...."

System in naked terror mode, I conveyed. Unable to accept input. Mr Kincaid had decided I was giving a talk after all. The eager BSFA crowd was pressed hard against my chest, making it something of a challenge to draw breath and hold them spellbound. I duly failed to hold them spellbound with the story of the unpublished *Guts!*—called by Ramsey Campbell "The first horror novel I don't even dare to read!"—which had become the first horror novel that even Grafton Books don't dare to publish.

(They accepted and paid for it in 1987; by the week of that BSFA meeting they'd just ticked their way into breach of contract for non-publication. Over the last year the authors have fielded upwards of eight hundred enquiries about publication date—six of them not from Neil Gaiman—by advising that seekers after truth write to Grafton editor Nick Austin and bother him. Nick himself dives under tables and out of windows when he sees me coming.)

Better to draw a veil over my reading from the *Guts!* chapters tastefully called "The Chyme of Midnight" and "The Lights Are Going Out", which probably went `Repeat ReadWordNotLoudEnough; If EndOfSentence then PauseNotLongEnough; until EndOfMS; ...Like that but less terse and exciting`. My audience seemed to be many echoing miles distant, a neat trick in a bar scarcely larger than a British Rail toilet.

Eventually firm hands were pressing beer on me, too late to lubricate thoughts still all tangled in algorithms and program loops. Abi Frost and Avedon Carol united to claim the existence of deep structural flaws

in the programming of my outmoded hairstyle. I tried to explain to Owen Whiteoak that he'd taken and quoted with ghastly seriousness a remark ("Do we all have to gafiate now?") which I'd made with cheerful irony. He looked blank, as so frequently he does. I failed to convince Paul Kincaid that important parts of me seemed to have been left behind in random-access memory. Gamma gave an impressive demonstration of how much spittle he could balance in his beard before falling over again. Greg Pickersgill probably said something. I probably misheard it.

Next morning, eyes still not quite in focus (which had been routine for two weeks), I toyed with the idea, glimpsed dimly at the BSFA thrash, of writing some science fiction. But the programming work was calling and there was no time. Charles Platt was right, you know.

If (Software = Disease)....

If (Blood = PriceOfAdmiralty)....

Question: = (ToBe) or (Not ToBe)....

Is anyone out there well-informed on the cold turkey cure?

ANSIBLE 46: Inexorable as an amok sloth, hard-hitting as eiderdown fluff, fast-moving as the continental glaciation of your choice, DAVE LANGFORD offers a further valium-paced issue of the semi-annual newszine of which it was once said, but not any more. Late-breaking news (we handle no other sort) and irate cancellations to 94 LONDON ROAD, READING, BERKS, RG1 5AU, UK....Cartoon: Jackie Burns. Language Lesson: deferred. Inertia © Isaac Newton, 1679.

STOPS & STARTS

"What I'd like to see from you," said the editor of my favourite computer magazine, "is a serious piece about the nuts and bolts of writing on word processors, done in a sort of Outraged of Tunbridge Wells style. None of this rubbish about beer and pubs."

Clearly I had been rumbled. In a time of desperate overwork which also saw my enforced absence from *Pulp*, I'd met one of this editor's more urgently shrieked deadlines by doing a hasty rewrite of an old fanzine article. This being all about callowly sitting in Welsh pubs playing forfeit games and getting unspeakably smashed, I had managed to establish the needed relevance to computers by pointing out that the game (Fizz-Buzz) was of its very essence mathematical.

The editor's insightful response was, "Oh God, do we pay you for this? I wouldn't read it and I have to."

I pusillanimously promised a pugnacious polemic, promptly produced, promulgating proper punctuation practice...and can now reveal that although the new article named no names, most of the research was done by skimming through things sent me by fans. Yes, all knowledge about weird punctuation can be found in fanzines.

Here for example is *Small Mammal*, ace monthly newsletter from Martin Easterbrook and Margaret Austin. For years this editorial duo has held that parenthesis marks are shy and easily oppressed creatures, liable to perish if subjected to overcrowding. Thus we get Detached Brackets, given breathing room (like this) by humanely positioned spaces. Oh, ugh.

This fanzine's love of the space programme is further demonstrated by its insertion of extra spaces before question and exclamation marks, thus ! Also before semicolons, and once in a while before a comma. Since the *Mammal* typewriter apparently drops the occasional random space into a line anyway, that last point might not actually be a certain guide to house style.

Applying these same powerful techniques of analysis to *The Caprician* would soon suggest its dual editorship, even without other clues like the subtle allusions to dual editors. In Christina Lake's bits, there are no interesting eccentricities of punctuation (boo, hiss). Turn the page to Lilian Edwards, and we enter a world reminiscent of *Mammal*'s, with illicit extra spaces appearing before colons, semicolons, question and exclamation marks. One of the snags of practising this little idiosyncrasy on a word processor

is that your end-of-sentence punctuation can wrap to a fresh line and mope there in glum solitude, which looks very silly. See *Caprician* 4, pages 12, 14 and 32, and carry on to deduce that Lilian typed the entire letter column.

The dangers of over-analysis are possibly shown by moving to *Critical Wave* and making the alarmed discovery that Steve Green and Martin Tudor favour unnecessary spaces before the same four punctuation marks chosen for this treatment by Lilian. If it weren't that *CW* uses a double hyphen for a dash while Ms Edwards prefers a single one, you might suspect that Steve and Martin either (a) employ Lilian to type the whole thing, or (b) are mere hoax fans manipulated by Lilian's vast behind-the-scenes intellect. Could they all have been instructed by the same unfrocked English teacher?

The Caprician, incidentally, represents dashes variously by one hyphen (Christina and Lilian), by two (their transcription of Mike Glicksohn) and by three (ditto of ditto).

In artistic contrast to this strange cult of superfluous space, I meant to raise two graceful fingers at those fanzines which parsimoniously omit the customary spaces after commas and even, sometimes, full stops. This seems especially perverse when after saving a miserable few characters by such eye-hurting habits, the typist goes on to leave vast echoing gaps between all the actual lines of text. Unfortunately I've lost my specimens of this fascinating mutant form. Tommy Ferguson (could it have been?) can breathe again.

Being a semi-prozine, Doug Fratz's *Thrust* takes great care with punctuation...especially hyphens, so essential when trying to make an even job of three right-justified columns. Where would you put a hyphen in "semi-prozines"? If *Thrust* 34 is a guide to hyphenation practice, the answer is: between the I and the N. The same issue offers "pseu-doscience", "exis-tence" and "Newto-nian". All right, I'm being picky, but if you have to break a word it seems wise to use the built-in fracture lines, as in "Newton-ian".

For further exciting hyphenation, see *Critical Wave*'s "specifica-lly", "commissi-ons", "begi-nning", "hearing", "bestse-ller", "perfor-med", "eloquen-tly"....

When that acclaimed nice guy Ian Sorensen gets a chance to work his will on English syntax, there seems no atrocity that he won't commit with a cruel and thin-lipped smile. His disadvantaged sentences cry in vain for an Oxfam airdrop of commas and semicolons. One of his ploys is the unexploded rhetorical question, which leaves readers in a state of semantic *coitus interruptus* by not actually ending with a question mark. For example, can this be right. (Stop press! After basing the above on memories of a Speculation flyer whose prose content was truly

diabolical, I note that his latest *Conrunner* shows Ian can do better when he has time.)

And *Pulp* itself has not always been wholly innocent of misplaced apostrophes: it's its co-editor John Harvey who in fits of blitzed wits omits to distinguish its "its" from its "it's". Repeat this ten times quickly without taking breath.

These niggling flaws, I hear you complain, don't stop the writer's meaning from leaking through. Fanzines, I hear you whine, do not need to work to the punctuation standards of the Oxford University Press. What's a mite disheartening is that fanzine writers have presumably spent a lifetime gobbling up books which offer innumerable examples of where those little marks go and on which side of them you put the space. On a simple basis of monkey-see-monkey-do...well, should we assume that fans who reject near-universal conventions must be aware of what they're up to? I call on the Society For Putting Spaces In Unlikely Places to make its motives known. The people should be told.

"What I'd like to see from you," I am regularly informed by my favourite Armenian editor, "is a column of fanzine reviews. It would kill two birds with one stone," she adds mysteriously. Conceivably this means that if *Pulp*'s reviews, editorial matter and regular contributions were condensed into a single quarto side by D. Langford, it would allow the beloved letter column to be expanded to 25 pages....

This has been a further exercise in not writing fanzine reviews.

"One of the better books of 1987." This laid-back use of a mere comparative rather than a superlative is definitely creeping eastward across the Atlantic. "One of the *best* books" sounds like a definite opinion. "One of the *better* books" seems faint praise indeed, placing the work either somewhere non-committally above the lousiest novel of the year, or perhaps just nebulously to the right of the dead-average median line on an imaginary bell-shaped curve of literary excellence. "Vince Clarke is one of the nicer members of the human race." Nicer than Joe Average? Nicer than Vlad the Impaler? Aha.

SOME INFORMAL REMARKS TOWARD THE PUNCTUATIONAL CALCULUS, PART II: THE FRIVOLOUS VERSION

I'm honoured to be so acknowledged by Orycon State University, for my research work in punctuation... one of the few areas where Britain still leads the world. (The other one is books about the Queen.)

Of course it was an American research team which first managed to completely and utterly split the infinitive, and your big-budget facilities like the Del Rey laboratories have succeeded in producing and publishing the tiniest subliterate particles. How thrilled we all were when the *New York Review of Science Fiction* used critical path analysis to show that the structure of *Dhalgren* is a double helix—a breakthrough which promises that one day we'll crack the semiotic code and discover what it's about. American achievements all: but Britain still proudly maintains the largest breeding group of semicolons in captivity.

It's thanks to our punctuation research that the British Isles have produced fanzines with names like *Hyphen*, *Slant*, *Dot*, and *Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwl'llantysiliogogogoch*—which is Welsh for "asterisk."

I must take this opportunity to dispel the ugly rumours about my own research work, in particular that brutal experiments have been conducted on live question marks and that unqualified staff are allowed to perform irrigation of colons. We carry out vivisection only on *volunteer* punctuation marks, all of which are first completely anaesthetized by immersing them in copies of *Analog*. This induces a profound stupor, or as we call it in the trade, a comma.

Our latest achievement is the world's first trans-punctuational surgery, carried out on a schizophrenic double-quote mark which turned out to be a pair of linked Siamese apostrophes—now living happy separate lives in different sentences.

Another exciting project is our attempt to synthesize a completely new symbol which will look blurred but vaguely convincing no matter where it appears, and can thus be inserted whenever you're not sure what the right punctuation is. We have an advance order for four billion of these, from Harry Harrison.

To conclude my words of thanks, I'd like to give you a live demonstration of how Britons use what you call a period and we call a full stop.

ANSIBLE REVIEW OF THE YEAR

A *live fanzine* is what I'm expected to give you now (at least, according to L. Ron Hubbard's Pocket Programme of the Future). I am not too good at this subtle impersonation stuff; at the Masquerade I was denied a spot prize because they said I'd totally failed to look like a human being, and pretending to be a fanzine is harder still. [Waves copy of *Ansible*.] Try to think of me as being printed in two columns of invisibly tiny type. I want to see you squinting. I want to see bloodshot eyes throughout the room... yes, most of you are ahead of me there.

Well, the historical background of my little SF newsletter *Ansible* doesn't really bear examination: but this is the Fan Programme, where the lid gets ripped off, and if it isn't Greg Pickersgill will rip it for you. So first, a bit of clarification. Some new fans may have the horrifying idea that *Ansible* is named after the faster-than-light communications gadget found in the works of Orson Scott Card. I wish to deny this terrible charge and point out that it's named after the faster-than-light communications gadget found in the words of Ursula Le Guin. Mr Card pinched it, in shameful imitation of me.

I've always wanted to ask Ursula Le Guin whether there was meant to be a hidden significance in the word. After I'd published my first few issues, Chris Priest wrote in gleefully to tell me I was the proud editor of a newsletter whose title was an anagram of Lesbian.

That first issue appeared at Seacon '79 in this very hotel. By the time I reached double figures I'd actually achieved the breakthrough of publishing a few bits of news, in between the vulgar remarks about people like Chris Priest. But *Ansible* was always keen to print up-to-the-minute items like extracts from such famous novels as *Neuron World*:

This was the Stygian darkness of which poets wrote. This was the pit of Acheron of which the creators of classic prose made mention. This was the kind of darkness which made thick, black velvet seem like chiffon by contrast. This was the kind of darkness that turned pitch into translucent polythene, when the two were placed side by side....

This was the back page of...*Ansible* 9!
Thank you, Lionel Fanthorpe. The same issue carried an anonymous flyer inviting people to join a dynamic new fannish political movement:

M.C.F.L.F.

Are you a *Middle Class Fan*? If so, you are a member of a nice but persecuted minority, and you are invited to close ranks with those of your own kind. The MIDDLE CLASS FANNISH LIBERATION FRONT will protect your interests.

You are a *Middle Class Fan* if:

1. You live in the HOME COUNTIES, the THAMES

VALLEY or a SMART SUBURB.

2. You possess a DEGREE, a PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION or a WORD PROCESSOR.

3. You buy at least ONE HARDCOVER SF NOVEL a year.

4. You prefer J. G. BALLARD and URSULA LE GUIN to LARRY NIVEN or ANNE McCaffrey.

5. You SECRETLY COLLECT SF as a HEDGE AGAINST INFLATION.

6. You have PUBLISHED SF PROFESSIONALLY.

7. You have had a REJECTION from Asimov's Sci-Fi Magazine (same as 6).

8. You have a TRENDY DISABILITY, such as deafness, literacy or wit.

9. You are ABLE TO READ WITHOUT MOVING YOUR LIPS.

10. You DONATE BLOOD or support the EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT.

11. You read THE SUNDAY TIMES, FOUNDATION or ANSIBLE.

12. You think WORKING CLASS FANS do actually smell a bit.

Are you a MIDDLE CLASS FAN? Now is the time to sit down with a nice cup of tea and be counted. Just fill in the form below....

TO: D. WEST, 17 Carlisle St, Keighley, West Yorks, BD21 4PX.

Yes! I am a *Middle Class Fan* and proud of it, and wish to join THE MIDDLE CLASS FANNISH LIBERATION FRONT. Please send me full details of how to look down on people, type out my own litho plates, make macramé pot-holders, cook vegetarian dishes and produce my own Christmas cards. I enclose £20.00 (American Express and Diners Club accepted)....

Who actually wrote this flyer remains a closely guarded secret, but computerized textual analysis hints that the style seems strangely influenced by that of *Inverted World*, *The Space Machine*, *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*.

Other popular *Ansible* features included Hazel's Language Lessons, which reached their high point with the vital information that the word *komaria* in Kikuyu means "to touch somebody reprovingly or threateningly with a stick and say 'weel'". David Garnett's serialized Dictionary of Science Fiction Terms only lasted long enough to cover the letter A, thank God, though some fans out there are still waiting hopefully for the promised Part Two: From "Bastard" to "Buttock".

The actual news items were sometimes a tiny bit less reliable. For example, in issue 44 I put in a rude bit about how Colin Wilson had been interviewed by Lisa Tuttle and spent all too much of the session going on about how he liked young lady interviewers in tight jeans. This was a deplorable misprint and I have to apologize: sources close to Lisa later corrected me and pointed out that Mr

Wilson had been far more interested in asking the colour of her knickers.

Before I go on, I'll just read some selected critical responses quoted in back issues of *Ansible*:

"It's a riot!" said *Foundation* (well, Colin Greenland anyway).

"As a newszine, it is the Emperor's New Clothes," enthused Mike Glycer in *File 770*.

"The cosmic adventure of the ultimate soldier on a desperate mission beyond death!" observed Timescape Books.

The *British Fantasy Newsletter* complained that *Ansible* is: "Not nearly as controversial as its reputation belies."

"We demand an immediate public apology," wrote Andre Norton's attorneys.

"Fandom," declared Greg Pickersgill as early as the second issue, "is a damn sight better life than pushing peanuts up the Pennines with your penis."

US fan Roy Tackett remarked, with characteristic tact: "There is, somehow, something attractive about the thought of sitting back and watching the English get nuked."

Robert Heinlein wrote, enthusiastically, "Our teeth grated, and my nipples went *spung!*"

"We thought of suing you," added Fred Harris, "but you haven't any money."

And William McGonagall had the last, deeply moving word: "And when Life's prospects may at times appear dreary to ye, / Remember Aloys Senefelder, the discoverer of lithography."

I think this establishes *Ansible's* credentials for sober, hard-hitting, no-nonsense, factual journalism. The following review of the last twelve months consists, I must warn you, of items even *Ansible* couldn't bring itself to print. Switch off your tape recorders and put your short-term memory in neutral, please—and remember the definition of fanzines I once found in that famous SF novel *Come, Hunt an Earthman* by Philip E. High:

"A Zine is a terror weapon. It rends and distorts, twisting the structure of the target completely out of shape."

AUGUST 1986

An exciting new science fiction magazine was launched, called *Amazing Stories* and edited by Hugo Gernsback...no, sorry, that must have been in 1985. I forgot to say that *Ansible* is sometimes a tiny bit late with your actual news.

In Sweden, twenty-six fans were injured in a zap-gun battle fought over the hot issue of whether "bheer" should be spelt with an "H", or with two.

Thanks to a leak in the Cabinet it was revealed that the British government had successfully issued court injunctions in Australia, America and the United Kingdom which for sixteen shameful years have

prevented an allegedly "subversive" and "politically embarrassing" book from being published. Its title is, of course, *The Last Dangerous Visions*.

In a very loud public statement, Harlan Ellison commented: "That's not fucking funny! The book is finished, complete, and the manuscript is all ready to be delivered. I'm just waiting for the final rewrite job on one last story, by L. Ron Hubbard."

SEPTEMBER 1986

John Brunner wrote to *New Scientist* magazine complaining that his expensive word processor wouldn't print out the Sanskrit and Middle English characters which he constantly needed for his daily correspondence. The next issue featured Harry Harrison's strongly worded reply, saying that there was no problem at all if one simply translated it all into Esperanto. The week after that, Sam J. Lundwall sent in a trenchant letter from Sweden, complaining about the way insular Englishmen like Harry Harrison talked about Esperanto and science fiction as though they owned it, when in fact both had been invented in Continental Europe in 1887.

SF fandom was plunged as usual into controversy when the Pope published a science fiction novel called *Immaculate Genesis*: there were worries about massive Hugo bloc-voting by members of the little-known "Catholic" cult which has been openly condemned by several British governments since the reign of Henry VIII....

"Gosh wow, fans, this is all a bit of an embarrassment for us," said the chairman of the Vatican City Worldcon bid.

OCTOBER 1986

A dynamic new writers' organization, the SFWGB—Science Fiction Writers of Great Britain—was founded, to grant to British authors their inalienable rights of fame, royalties and the pursuit of free booze in a private room well away from the fans. Any writer would be qualified to join if he or she had published three stories in SF magazines anywhere in the world, except America.

Joanna Russ wrote an angry public letter to complain that the announced Conspiracy '87 programme is sexist, since it features masked balls.

NOVEMBER 1986

The Moral Majority developed a simple new scientific test to determine whether SF and fantasy books are Godless, immoral, and deserving of being burnt. Books which are suspect—i.e. which have been published—have their entire print runs stacked in Death Valley and napalmed. If God doesn't miraculously save them (explained the Reverend Jerry

Falwell), this will be a direct condemnation from on high. Most fundamentalists condemned this approach as "half-hearted" and "wishy-washy", suggesting that we should get straight to the root of the evil by extending the same technique to authors.

Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov received an advance of six hundred billion dollars for a proposed novel to be written by both their word processors in collaboration. (This was originally going to be done via a specially set-up geosynchronous satellite linkage, but it turned out that Asimov's word processor was afraid of heights.)

The working title is *2000 and Foundation*: this will reconcile the Clarke and Asimov future histories by revealing that all along, the secret directing intelligence behind the mysterious monolith and the Second Foundation has been John W. Campbell.

DECEMBER 1986

London's post office workers held their traditional, seasonal celebrations of Saturnalia in Trafalgar Square, with wild orgiastic dancing around a huge blazing bonfire of undelivered Conspiracy hotel booking forms.

Geoff Ryman abandoned his plans for a twenty-five-minute play adaptation—for performance at Conspiracy—of Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*. "It wasn't challenging enough for me," he said. "Instead, I'm now planning to do a fifteen-minute monologue version of *Stand on Zanzibar*."

JANUARY 1987

The Society for the Promulgation of More and More Science Fiction Awards announced an exciting new trophy, the Volsted Gridban Memorial Award For Consistent Integrity. This would be presented as a consolation prize to authors who after ten years of publishing SF still haven't received any other sort of award. Unfortunately, the judging committee couldn't find any writers who qualified.

The British SF Association finally paid heed to the critics who complained that its magazines didn't have the popular appeal which would attract a wide audience. Membership increased tenfold on the appearance of the new tabloid version of *Vector*, retitled *The Daily Sci Fi*. Highlights of the first issue were the nude picture of Anne McCaffrey on page 3, an Agony Aunt column run by John Norman, and the feature article *10 Tell-Tale Signs That Show Your Neighbour Is A Trekkie*.

Swedish fandom was once again plunged into all-out war, as usual. An agonized press release reports: "This is the most appalling and shameful scandal to have rocked world fandom since science fiction was invented by Sam J. Lundwall in 1887." The issues

involved are a bit unclear, but the central dispute seems to be about whether or not Otis Adelbert Kline was or wasn't a better writer than Captain S. P. Meek.

FEBRUARY 1987

Convention fans were horrified by the recent discovery—unearthed in an old copy of *Fahrenheit 451*—that books are inflammable and could be used as weapons to set fire to convention hotels, or even more probably, convention hotel managers. A hastily proposed amendment to the Worldcon constitution requires that these dangerous items be peace-bonded—sealed shut with wheel-clamps borrowed from local police—before they can be allowed at conventions. “Even that may not be enough,” said a spokesman. “We dropped a copy of *Battlefield Earth* from a height of 100 feet on to a volunteer gopher, and it seems that even with peace-bonding, these books can be pretty dangerous....”

Meanwhile, Ian Watson joined the Freemasons.

MARCH 1987

A new science fiction magazine was announced from Davis Publications Inc: *Vincent Omniaveritas's Magazine of Cyberpunk*, full of hard-hitting, action-packed, information-dense essays demonstrating conclusively that “cyberpunk” SF is infinitely more wonderful than any other form of literature since Gutenberg. It is hoped that after the first year, the magazine size can be expanded to allow the inclusion of some fiction.

Later that month, riots erupted in the streets of Stockholm as Swedish fandom debated the issue of whether professional magazines should be bound up with staples. (One bloodily divisive side issue concerns the rival merits of the two spellings “sthaples” and “staphles”.)

APRIL 1987

At the Easter convention, old-time fans complained again that the traditional feel of fanzines had been destroyed by all these computers and laser printers. They called for a return to the golden years when fanzines were created on old-fashioned IBM Selectric typewriters and reproduced by traditional hand-crafted offset lithography.

In Britain, H. M. Government denied scurrilous rumours that they planned to introduce a tax on books. “We’ve worked out a much fairer approach,” the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced. “We’re bringing reading into line with television—with a simple, no-nonsense tax on the receiving apparatus. The annual tax will be levied on all users of eyes. As a special bonus, a single licence will allow each

individual to operate as many eyes as he or she wants, provided they’re all kept in the same house.”

In line with Government educational policy, there will be large discounts for illiterates.

MAY 1987

D. West published his longest fanzine article yet: “Repeat Performance”, a dazzling 144-page analysis of something or other, which explores transsexuality, baked beans, investment strategy for unit trusts, how to make your own toilet paper, the reasons why the rest of British and American fandom are a load of wankers, and the morality of mud-wrestling. All these strands are brilliantly drawn together into D’s final conclusion, which is that writing fanzine articles is a waste of time and only an idiot would do it.

The 1986 Heineken Lager advertising campaign received vast numbers of nominations for the Hugo Award, in the categories Best Novel, Best Non-Fiction and Best Dramatic Presentation. After long debate the Worldcon committee brilliantly compromised by shortlisting it under Best Fan Artist.

JUNE 1987

Greg Pickersgill had a nifty new idea for a team event which could fill a twelve-hour stretch of fan room programming at Conspiracy...synchronized ceiling watching. Competitors would lie back and stare in unblinking silence at the ceiling, excluding all thoughts from their minds and thus demonstrating that they had enough grim mental self-sufficiency to read even Piers Anthony novels. Unfortunately this suggestion never made it to the Conspiracy programme-planning meeting, since Greg accidentally spent that day practising the advanced techniques of his new sport.

Brian Aldiss announced his new literary project. Thanks to massive popular demand from his bank manager, he’s working on an immense sequel with one of the following tentative titles: *Helliconia's Edge*, *The Helliconia of the New Sun*, *Chapter House Helliconia* or *Helliconia August Bank Holiday Weekend*.

At the same time, Bob Shaw came to an important realization about his *Ragged Astronauts* series. In the first book he established that he could bend the laws of physics as much as he liked, since this is a different universe with different physical constants. His new brainwave is that this different universe will also have different rules of grammar, syntax and spelling! As he told *Ansible*, “This could save a fortune in proofreading!”

JULY 1987

The London “Forbidden Planet” bookshop attracted attention with its 100-foot-tall papier-mache display

model of J. G. Ballard, made entirely from recycled copies of the fourth Conspiracy progress report.

In America, a Senate investigatory committee received anonymous letters from Puerto Rico and Cincinnati, accusing the last six TransAtlantic Fan Fund administrators of being heavily involved in shipping arms to Iran...as well as legs to Iraq and fishnet tights to West Yorkshire.

Swedish fandom achieved another historic first! "This is the proudest and most exciting development ever," says Ahrvid Engholm's enthusiastic press release about the first use of tactical nuclear weapons in a fan feud.

AUGUST 1987: CONSPIRACY

In a savage confrontation on Friday night at the Worldcon, hotel liaison person Katie Hoare was confronted by six psychopathic hotel managers wielding flick knives and bicycle chains. Later, a spokesman for the RSPCA complained that this sort of graphic violence was totally unfair to hotel managers.

The fan programme item "Why Are Americans? How Dare They Continue To Exist?" was expected to be controversial. Happily, after mere hours of discussion and only a few minor flesh wounds, fannish common sense prevailed—Mike Glyer and the entire Los Angeles SF Society agreed to having been totally in the wrong, and promised to correct their errors by applying at once for Welsh citizenship.

This dramatic conversion was brought about by the diplomacy of Greg Pickersgill, who smoothed over all the weekend's international frictions by clearly explaining the proper definitions of important fannish terms. For example, "intolerably imperialist cultural chauvinism" translates as "being American", and "understandable patriotic spirit" merely means "insulting Americans".

After nasty experiences with slimming drugs earlier this year, Bob Shaw was happy to announce from under a Fan Room table that he'd switched to an exclusive diet of the new and organically produced appetite-suppressant called "gin and tonic".

Fans were delighted to hear that Britain's most famous unreadable author, Robert Lionel Fanthorpe, has turned his black belt to good use and made three million pounds from evangelistic mugging. In a staggering act of generosity he has used the money to set up an independent foundation for the promotion of fine SF...Fanthorpe Services Inc. The first major classic unearthed for publication by the associated imprint, Thousand Year Rule Press, is "Leo Brett's" famous *March of the Robots*.

("Strange metallic things; things that were alien to the soft green grass of earth. Terrifying things,

steel things; metal things; things with cylindrical bodies and multitudinous jointed limbs. Things without flesh and blood. Things that were made of metal and plastic and transistors and valves and relays, and wires. Metal things. Metal things that could think. *Thinking metal things....*")

Several major pundits have already praised this to the skies as the work of a true master—world-renowned critics and authors like Algis Budrys, Orson Scott Card, Anne McCaffrey, Gene Wolfe and Fred Harris.

Despite initial worries about Scandinavian feuds being carried on at Conspiracy, Swedish fandom won everyone's heart by simply sharing a bottle of whisky and passing into a mass coma. The only sour note was struck when a hotel barman tried to charge them corkage on the miniature. (Oh dear, these old gags will creep in.)

Mike Glyer protested hugely at the insensitivity of the Committee in allowing a Fan Programme item with an offensive title. *The Ansible Review of the Year* is a clearly chauvinist name in that it fails to grant equal time to the vast majority of SF newsletters called *File 770*. In a controversial reply published by the convention newsletter, Martin Tudor offensively and publicly stated, "Er, sorry." Mike was so affronted by this that he unilaterally boycotted the hotel swimming pool.

The Ministry of Defence refused to comment on persistent but elusive reports that an unidentified floating Malcolm Edwards had been sighted hovering 200 feet over Brighton beach. Sceptical observers pointed out that although the Committee has been investigating these rumoured brief sightings for five whole days, there was still no hard evidence that con chairman Malcolm Edwards exists.

* * * * *

At this point I'd better stop, for the usual reason that I stop doing an issue of *Ansible*. It's not so much the constraints of time and space; it's just that I can face only so many lawsuits and death threats per issue. Even now I have a terrible feeling that at tonight's SFWA party, Fred Harris and I may be booked for a mutually enriching exchange of hurled drinks.¹ If I get out of this hotel alive, I'll promise to think about beginning to consider starting work on *Ansible 51*...real soon now.

Meanwhile, thanks for listening.

1. This feeble attempt to establish precognitive powers is transparently a later afterthought. [Ed.]

HUGOS AND CRITICAL MASS

The first time I ever received an award from the wonderful world of SF was an occasion of slight embarrassment for me.

There had been a now mercifully forgotten fuss about the secret machinations behind the Nova Award, traditionally presented to the wrong British fanzine at the Birmingham (England) SF Group's annual Novacon. Plied with beer, I had volunteered to reform the selection procedure, and after earth-shattering consultations published the three-volume set of revised Nova voting rules (with the seven appendices) which was supposed to end controversy forever. What was a little embarrassing was the fact that in 1977, the first year of my new, enlightened voting system, I won the bloody award....

It took mere seconds to come to terms with glory and brace myself to receive a tasteful certificate, suitable for framing. Little had I realized the infinite artistic resource and sagacity of fandom. The architect of the 1977 trophy was Birmingham's—as opposed to America's—Ray Bradbury, and he really went to town. What still stands seventeen inches tall on my library mantelpiece has to be seen to be disbelieved.

First comes a marble base, and then a squat gilt cylinder, and on top of that a second marble slab, from which rises a proud column of purple and gold anodized aluminium with holes in it through which golden starbursts may be seen, and this is topped with a sort of platform chequered in glittery orange and turquoise plastic, supporting a chess-knight crafted from the same turquoise glitter, having in the side of its head an ingenious trapdoor which discloses strange cogwheels and watchsprings within, this whole crowning section of the artifact being enclosed in gilded wire loops carrying little balls to represent the planets in their orbits or (possibly) electrons caught in the act of defying the uncertainty principle. It is difficult to dust.

Some say that all this was intended to symbolize the works of the 1977 Novacon guest of honour, John Brunner, who nevertheless did not sue. Certainly the guest in the following year was Anne McCaffrey, and I distinctly remember the Nova winner leaving a thick trail of plastic wings and claws as he proudly carried off the 1978 award, modelled on the sort of dissolute dragon favoured by Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever.

These wondrous trophies of a bygone age (before the Novas settled down to being tasteful glass paperweights on midget plinths) came rather forcibly to mind when I read some bitchings by a British visitor to a recent US Worldcon. There had been a display of Hugos from times past, and the writer waxed rude about how shabby and unimaginative the Conspiracy '87 Hugo bases had been. They were, in other words, small and wooden, and you could get one into a suitcase. In fact (I will remark, preening

smugly) you could get two into a suitcase.

Compare the glory of the 1988 Nolacon base, rising in a translucent epoxy cone resembling giant inverted broccoli, towering above smaller recipients and generally looking not so much like an award as something which, if God noticed, would provoke a repetition of that distressing and undemocratic police action at Babel. My own representatives at Nolacon wept tears of relief and opened champagne with a liberal hand when I failed to win one of the things. "It would have given us," they said, "the freight of our lives."

Came Noreascon III in 1989, and my luck was in. Since for closely guarded financial reasons I wasn't there, my old pal Martin Hoare picked up the Hugo for me and subsequently forwarded the bill for his medical expenses. His slow progress back to Britain was charted by postcards of skyscrapers with captions like "Hugo Award, south elevation", and involved numerous sceptical Customs searches. While awaiting his arrival I asked a returned British editor, John Jarrold, what the 1989 Hugo actually looked like. He thought for a bit. "A green toilet seat, covered with a load of balls."

In due course I found that this was a shade unfair and that the Noreascon trophy possessed an artistry somewhat beyond the level of the 1977 Nova Award. It also possessed a high-pressure grease nipple and no instructions on its use, but that's another story. What had reduced Martin to a shattered wreck was that it was exceedingly heavy (ten pounds or so; a hefty marble dais was involved in the construction), exceedingly if not Nolaconishly large (about sixteen inches high and ten across the base), and exceedingly fragile (one was documented as disintegrating in a crash of lost marbles within minutes of its presentation).

"I had to take it completely apart, and glue and screw it together again in England," apologized my faithful courier. "And even then, Customs gave me a hell of a time. All those suspicious ball bearings and metal parts...." I didn't question him too closely about whether the high-pressure grease nipple was original or a later interpolation from his workshop. He had suffered enough.

But his tales of hissed warnings at the 1989 Hugo ceremony ("*Careful, it's a heavy bastard!*") inevitably suggest the bad-taste scenario in which some frail and elderly author, beloved by us all, accepts the Hugo and is at once felled to the ground by the weight of our adulation....

Let's point no querulous fingers at past award designers, but make a note for the future. Most Hugos are likely to travel by air immediately after the convention, and what looks great at the presentation (not to mention terrific on the mantelpiece at home) can still be a nightmare to transport. Perhaps coming Worldcons should either refrain from trying to go beyond recent years' physical pinnacles of award grandeur, or should budget for the crating and shipping of things like the gigantic black slab planned

as the Hugo base for 2001.

Having now ruined my chances of any future awards, I'll close by reporting a conversation with an imaginary member of the ConFiction committee.

I asked: "About your own Hugos...have I provided you with a base for discussion?"

"We have been thinking," he said, "of an enormous, traditional clog."

"But," I protested, "would not the Hugo itself, being a chrome-plated rocket thirteen and a half inches (or 35 of your Terran centimetres) high, seem incongruous in the context of a clog?"

"Aha! You have never seen our high-fashion, stiletto-heeled clogs? Our winners—not one of them from Holland—shall wear their Hugos home, and hop in stately procession from the ceremony." He smiled, and vanished as mysteriously as he had come.

ANSIBLE 42 is the ultimate answer to ...well, it must have been a pretty bloody stupid question. Other such questions are: Who edits it? (Dave Langford....) What is it? (A: A tasteful SF newsletter bringing you the latest edifying information from SFWA etc. B: A loathsome and far too infrequent scandal-sheet wallowing in all manner of moral decay. C: Hold Over Funds....) Who did the cartoons? (A: Alexis Gilliland. B: A very clever Alexis Gilliland parodist....) What does **LASTISH 43** mean? (A: Your subscription runs out next issue. B: At least it didn't say **SUB DUE**, meaning you ran out *this* issue. C: It says *****? Boy, you really are in trouble. Better not to ask.) Why is this issue so late, then? (A: No award. B: Conservative. C: March 1985. D: Don't know. E: Hazel's Language Lesson was contributed by famous Nigel E. Richardson.) Can I phone you...? (A: No. B: Pardon?) What's happened to the typeface this issue? (A: Rampant technophilia. B: Laziness. C: A new Apricot PC. D: Chris Priest. E: Pangolin Systems Ltd. F: Most of the above.) Why? (A: Why not?)

HACK'S QUEST

Welcome to *Hack's Quest*, the interactive computer game that makes the *Hitch-Hiker* adventure look like a Conservative Party conference, and *Nightmare on Elm Street 27* look like a repeat. In this sizzling intellectual challenge you play a freelance writer with an article to deliver. The editor has just moved your deadline two weeks forward because of an unforeseen cataclysm called the New Year. It is a bleak Monday. You have a hangover.

Type your commands at the > prompt. (Enter **HELP** to ask for assistance.)

You are in an indescribably sordid hallway. Shabbily carpeted stairs lead up to your workroom.

>HELP

Kindly remember you are a freelance writer. That is: you're on your own, sunshine.

>GO NORTH

Stop kidding around. You have no idea which way is north.

>GO UP

That's better....You are in a grimy workroom whose stale, lifeless air is thick with the sweat of old deadlines. Bills litter the few square feet of available floor. Like an altar-idol dominating the foul temple of some obscene cult, the word processor broods over the shambles.

>TURN ON WORD PROCESSOR

You turn savagely on the computer, but it is totally unmoved by your threatening attitude.

>SWITCH ON COMPUTER

You can't do that.

>WHY NOT?

In your eagerness to rush to the pub last night, you forgot to switch the machine off. It now seems very warm. An electricity bill is prominent in the heap at your feet.

>INSERT WORK-IN-PROGRESS DISK

I see no disk.

>SEARCH FOR DISK

An hour passes. Eventually you find the disk under some rejection slips in the far corner of the room.

>INSERT DISK

Are you sure?

>ER...WIPE DISK WITH HANKY AND INSERT

By first cleaning off about an ounce of revolting tangled hairs and dust-bunnies glued by static to the disk, you have avoided the immediate, catastrophic failure of your drive. (Score 1 point.)

A blank screen confronts you!

>WRITE ARTICLE

You can't do that. You have no inspiration.

>SEEK INSPIRATION

Where do you want to look? There is a book here. There are bills and rejection slips here. There are old fanzines and computer mags here. There is a

bottle here labelled "Inspiration: Matured 10 Years in Oak Casks at Glengrotty," but it is empty. This is why you have a hangover.

> EXAMINE BOOK

The book is *Roget's Thesaurus*. You study it for inspiration and find excitement, possession, afflatus, exhilaration, intoxication, headiness, encouragement, animation, incitement, provocation, irritation....As usual, the irritating truth is that there's no inspiration to be had from Roget. But one does keep hoping.

> EXAMINE MAGAZINES

They are full of good stuff. You wonder whether you could steal something from older ones which everyone must have forgotten.

> YES! STEAL LOTS OF IDEAS

Unfortunately your rigid moral code prevents you from actually doing this.

> OH

But as you stare blankly into space, the shadow of a notion begins to take shape in your mind....The doorbell rings!

> IGNORE DOORBELL

It might be someone with a cheque, or Steven Spielberg's office boy asking after movie rights to your articles on How To Write Assembler Real Good.

> GO TO DOOR

You are in the sordid hall. It was the postman. Why did he ring? Peering blearily at the mat, you find a card saying: "You failed to answer the door within the prescribed 0.5 nanoseconds, and three valuable-looking parcels have therefore been rushed back to our depot two hours' walk away." The rest of the mail is all brown envelopes with sinister windows in them.

> GO UPSTAIRS

You are in the grimy workroom. Your train of thought, such as it was, has been completely derailed and lies upside down next to the tracks.

> SIT AT KEYBOARD AND WAIT

As you stare blankly into space, the shadow of a notion begins....The telephone rings!

> IGNORE PHONE

Are you kidding? You deliberately chose one whose tone rattles the windows of houses across the street, to make sure you never miss an important call from your publishers. Or Steven Spielberg, of course.

> RELUCTANTLY ANSWER PHONE

A hollow voice says: "Good morning! Have you thought how much you could enhance the value of your crummy home by ripping out the windows and installing expensive double glazing, covering up the original Victorian brickwork with synthetic cladding in a lurid shade of pink, and replacing that out-of-date slate roof with fibreglass simulated thatch?"

> SAY NO AND SLAM PHONE DOWN WITH UNNECESSARY VIOLENCE

Ok.

> WAIT

As you stare blankly....

> TAKE PHONE OFF HOOK

...you are inspired with a sudden, blazing need for coffee!

> WHAT?

Coffee. A beverage made by brewing the roasted and ground seeds or beans of a tropical evergreen shrub 8 to 10 metres high belonging to the genus *Coffea*, of the Rubiaceae, or madder family. Or in your case, instant from the Co-op.

> SIGH. MAKE COFFEE

You have wasted valuable time catering to your selfish wish for coffee. It is only two hours to the last postal collection! The article must be finished and printed out by then!

> HELP

We have already been into this. Remember, you pay Class 4 National Insurance contributions, which bring you absolutely no benefits but are purely and simply an extra tax levied on you for your temerity in being a self-employed person. You are, in other words, the scum of the earth. You expect help?

> PLEASE

You have discovered the magic word! (Score 1 point.) Here is a hint. To solve this puzzle you must find and read something you have not yet studied.

> EXAMINE WHISKY BOTTLE

The small print says that it contained known carcinogen E6234, permissible colouring, fusel oil and monosodium glutamate.

> EXAMINE COMPUTER

There is a message on the keyboard! It begins: "TAB QWERTYUIOP".

> TA VERY MUCH. EXAMINE MAIL

The first envelope contains a bank statement. It is horrifying! Your overdraft exceeds the poll tax deficit of many small boroughs. Staring at it in terror, you feel all your moral inhibitions dissolving. (Score 1 point.)

> AHA! STEAL IDEAS FROM OLD MAGS AND WRITE ARTICLE

Ok. You have now shed your scruples and demonstrated the qualities required to survive in 1991 Britain. (Score 2 points.)

You have completed Level 1 of Hack's Quest.

Your score was 5 points. You have graduated from No-Hoper and now qualify as a Grubby Hack. In Level 2 you will confront the thrill-packed challenges of the Plagiarism Suit, the Cirrhosis Clinic and Writing A Novel.

Save position now?

> QUIT GAME

You can't do that.

ANOTHER USEFUL REVIEW

We were delighted to score an exclusive scoop by being the first magazine to review Grottysoft's long-promised SPUNG! SPUNG is an integrated development environment with built-in calculator, style checker, pop-up PacMan game, Serbo-Croat spreadsheet and IQ test. And once again, Grottysoft have a runaway winner on their hands!

Owing to production holdups, our demonstration PCW version of SPUNG was supplied on 24 disks for an IBM PC running in Amstrad simulation mode. Three special ROM packs and a co-processor borrowed from a BBC Master completed the easy-to-understand set-up, which will of course be even simpler when the final PCW program is available. For instance, SPUNG will be crammed on to a mere 15 PCW disks, losing only minor facilities such as the ability to process text files exceeding 150 words.

It only takes a few hours to install SPUNG for your computer. The simple, on-screen, interactive installation program is a model of clarity: we knew we were in good hands as SPUNGINSTAL went straight to the important points by asking WAHT SORT OF COMPUETER IS THS?, DOES IT HAV DISK DRIVE(S)? and ARE YOU USIG MONITOR? By the way, it's necessary to run the SET24X80 program, load the SPUNGKEY.WP keyboard file and temporarily disconnect the printer cable before SPUNG will run...we're sure these points will be mentioned in the production version of the manual, along with the need for a special power supply.

AMAZING INNOVATIONS

It soon becomes obvious that SPUNG is a rich, powerful piece of fifth-generation software which can only grow in usefulness and indispensability with months or years of experience. The 25 minutes we were allowed with it (Grottysoft's Securicor man was on a tight schedule) did not perhaps exhaust the full range of its possibilities, but what we saw impressed us thoroughly. Pop-up, pull-down, multi-windowed, Y-front menus make the simplest functions available in as few as fifteen keystrokes—and there are short cuts too. The designers are not afraid to make imaginative use of the keyboard: the space bar, for example, has become an automatic "toggle key" which moves you in mere seconds between the accountancy, graphics and desktop horoscope functions, and after a minute or two we found it much easier to enter spaces the SPUNG way, by holding down ALT, EXTRA and f3.

Error messages are signalled dramatically by reprogramming the "beep" to sound like a large gong and flashing the entire screen on and off five times a second until you acknowledge your mistake (by pressing the POWER button, of course—everything else is deactivated. We've never met a quicker way of teaching users not to make mistakes, especially

since reloading SPUNG means fourteen disk changes).

That this is high-powered, fast-lane software is confirmed by the fact that it comes already set up to print out on Grottysoft's own-model laser printer, giving fabulous text quality for only £2200 extra. What's more, a Printer Configurator program is promised for next year, which will allow SPUNG's sensational graphics to be simulated on your old PCW printer too.

By the way, you'll need a memory upgrade, a hard disk, an add-on serial port, a mouse and a bar-code reader if you really want to make the most of the mindboggling facilities of SPUNG.

ALL THIS AND MORE!

The documentation is particularly impressive, more than 1000 pages of detailed and clearly-written information which should be translated from the Korean in no time. (Speaking of which, we're told that retail copies will offer a selection of spelling checkers besides the Rastafarian one supplied to us.) Despite all the challenges we threw at it, SPUNG always did very nearly exactly what we thought the manual said it should, and hardly crashed at all.

One warning for all you potential users: under certain rare circumstances, such as your pressing f5, PASTE, EXIT or Return, it is possible for the extra overhead of SPUNG's disk accesses to set fire to the floppy drive. We pointed this out to Grottysoft, and with their usual helpfulness they replied at once that nobody else had reported such a problem, that they would nevertheless write to their American parent company for advice, and that they could supply cheap CO₂ fire extinguishers as an added customer service. Our one small cavil has thus been effectively dealt with before the program's official release.

With such raw programming power and such in-depth support, it's remarkable that Grottysoft have been able to keep the price down to an attractive £199, exclusive of VAT, postage, packing and the special add-on software needed for SPUNG to accept text in lower case. No better bargain exists in the PCW market today, as the full-colour, multi-page ads in the next fourteen issues of this very magazine will testify!

AND THE MORAL IS...

Although the tone of *8000 Plus* tends to be a mite more cynical than the above...if you think that reviews reminiscent of this one never ever appear in any computer magazine, I can only admire the purity of your thoughts.

MISLEADING CASES

(In the High Court today Mr Justice Gleet summed up in the case of *Stupefying Software Ltd vs. Halibut*.)

Members of the jury, the facts of this case have already been put to you several times by counsel, with such matchless eloquence as to render them in all respects unintelligible. Numerous weighty documents have been placed in evidence, and although these purport to be elementary "software manuals" devised for easy assimilation by the meanest intellect, it would perhaps not be wholly unjust to suspect that their meaning eludes you as it eludes me. Let me therefore strive to convey to you, probably for the first time, what this litigation is about.

Stupefying Software Ltd, as its managing director has informed this Court, is devoted to expanding the frontiers of knowledge, freeing mankind from mental drudgery, and (whether this be desirable or no) hurling its customers into the twenty-first century. To this laudable end, the company manufactures various useful computer "programs".

It is agreed that the defendant, Mr Alfred Halibut, purchased one such item, a light-hearted and diversionary game entitled *MegaRambo Nukefest*. Nor is it disputed, irrespective of the loathing with which one might regard it, that this was delivered in good working order.

Stupefying Software Ltd has consequently argued, with a smugness which you may or may not have found intolerable, that its part of the contract was amply fulfilled. Yet even the most bovine and slumbrous occupant of the jury box (I do not by this phrase wish to call undue attention to the snoring gentleman in the back row) must have dimly gathered that Mr Halibut disagrees.

The point at issue is an interesting and legally lucrative one, concerning as it does the unwritten aspects of the transaction. Let me strive to offer some examples sufficiently elementary for your limited comprehension. Were you, as a keen gardener, to order three tons of horse manure for the delectation of your roses, the technical fulfilment of this order would not impress you should the substance be unloaded on top of your car. Were you the proprietor of a lodging-house whose regulations prohibited cats and dogs, you would not feel debarred from ousting a tenant who, while adhering to the actual letter of the law, had established in his room a small colony of wolves and a puma.

You may ask whether these analogies have any relevance, but I hope you will not, since should you do so I would instantly order your committal for contempt of court. Mr Halibut claims that despite providing him with a superficially functional program, Stupefying Software has acted as unreasonably as the villains of my examples.

On receipt of his computer disk, Mr Halibut attempted to copy its contents for purposes of what is termed "backup". This process, the Court has been informed by authoritative if semi-literate expert witnesses, is to the computer user as important as life insurance, as psychologically vital as underclothing. You may therefore consider that on attempting to use his copy, Mr Halibut was rightly perturbed to be greeted with the message, "STUPIFYING SOFTWARE THEIFGUARD PROTECTON SYSTEM, YOUR ATEMPT TO DO ILLEGAL COPYING HAS FALED HA HA!!!"

Despite the anguish and distress of hazarding a "master" disk in actual use, the defendant was resolved to test his newly acquired educational product. This time he encountered the no less peremptory remark, "THIS PRODUCT IS PERSONIZED WAHTS YOUR NAME ?" Having typed his reply, he was ejected from the program with the derisive retort, "ILEGAL USER !!" By trial and error, and (as he has told this Court) the application of considerable intelligence, the defendant deduced the humiliating need to type his name as it appeared on Stupefying Software's receipt; that is, as "A HALBIT", in capitals.

Mr Halibut admits that his *MegaRambo Nukefest* game thereafter functioned as advertised, displaying tasteful and graphically artistic nuclear detonations over the relevant tracts of South-East Asia. However, his pleasure was further muted by the fact that one-quarter of his computer's screen was effectively unused, instead showing the words, "THIS POGROM REGISTERD FOR; A HALBIT 299 MAFEKING VILLAS NW27 UNAUTHORIZED USE BY OTHER OR TRANSFER OF LICENSE IS ILEGAL UNDER COPYRIGT ACT PLEASE REPORT ILEGAL COPYING TO STUPIFYING SOFTWARE AT ONSE !!!"

The defendant claims to have felt deeply insulted.

Speaking for the plaintiff, the managing director of Stupefying Software has told the Court that without such basic precautions, Mr Halibut would be inevitably tempted to bulk-mail illicit copies to his numerous and unsavoury acquaintances, to advertise them for sale with criminally photocopied instructions, and to hawk them at less than cost on the streets of Singapore.

Here Mr Halibut's case strays from the broad paths of law and reason into the murky undergrowth of the controversial. Such prejudice and distrust, he alleges, left him thunderstruck. How, he movingly enquired until I was compelled to silence him, how could Stupefying Software imagine him capable of misconduct on this scale? His eyes having been opened to the corruption of the software world, Mr Halibut made haste to stop the cheque he had sent to Stupefying Software and which through an oversight had not yet been cleared.

For, as he argues and you may feel bound to agree, if such untrustworthiness is indeed prevalent,

how could Mr Halibut be sure that forged copies of his cheque would not be disseminated to numerous and unsavoury computer dealers, or hawked at large discount on the streets of Singapore?

You may think this reasoning disingenuous. Repelled and nauseated though you must be by Stupefying Software Ltd and its products, you may feel that the company's action for non-payment is justified and must succeed. However—

(At this point the jury, all coincidentally computer owners who had struggled with ponderously protected disks, found Mr Halibut not guilty without leaving the box, gave him three cheers, and begged that all costs should be borne by Stupefying Software.)

ALL-PURPOSE REVIEW: Who could resist this heady brew of innovative plot elements? Telepathic sex with a variety of cetaceans...dizzying excursions into cyberspace within the protagonist's self-aware pocket calculator...a trek across the entire surface of that incredible, galaxy-spanning Klein bottle known as Inworld, where magic works...emotional problems of a doomed cyborg space-pilot unable to have normal sex since orgasm propels him and his ship on a multi-lightyear jump...successive heroic quests for the ten lost Talismans of Power (grail, sword, ring, sceptre, crown, helm, orb, amulet, crystal and inter-galactic warp-drive), helped and hindered by elves, dwarves and the Wild Hunt...harmless, cuddly pets which on exposure to radiation spawn terrifying, kilometre-long sandsnakes...maps, computer-generated graphics, and a long glossary detailing the clickspeech of the enigmatic alien Neppat. The actual writing, with its echoes of Robert Heinlein, Piers Anthony, Alan Dean Foster and Lionel Fanthorpe, mirrors perfectly the author's ambitions....

100 YEARS AGO

Welcome, one and all, to the second monthly number of this family periodical. Your warm response to our first has gratified the Editors most excessively. No doubt of it: scattered through the length and breadth of England are thousands of happy devotees of the machine from which our publication takes its name—none of whom would willingly return to the old, wearisome ways, yet most of whom are a little “stumped” by the mechanical intricacies. It is for you that we publish *Remington Plus*.

Without further ado we present our first “Enquire Within Upon Everything” page. Herein readers' queries will be answered monthly by “Aunt Davinia”, who seeks to be to you a Counsellor, Guardian, Instructor, Companion and Friend.

“Baffled”—We agree that the pamphlet of instructions supplied with your machine is shamefully deficient. The reason that your letters are difficult to read lies in a point which was not made clear: you are meant to insert a sheet of paper into the typewriter by dint of rotating the knurled knob at the top right. If you do not follow this somewhat technical explanation, you must consult the tradesman who supplied your machine. You will find that the use of paper makes the result far more legible and also less costly to post. (Should you wish us to return the roller carrying your letter, you must remit eighteenpence for carriage.)

“Paterfamilias”—An excellent spelling checker is published by Bowdler & Company, containing none of the terms to which you discreetly allude. Your children may consult it without fear. However, such lexicons do not offer the alternative renditions you require. The “add-on software” of M. Roget provides this facility but includes notions somewhat too sensational for those of tender years.

“lowercase”—This is a frequent enquiry. Although the feature for which you ask was in fact introduced in 1878, it has never in our opinion been adequately documented. Somewhere amongst the keys of your machine—we cannot say where without further information—you should find one carrying the legend “Shift”. Depress this gently yet firmly when striking the first letters of proper names and the opening words of sentences. With a few weeks' practice you will soon master the trick of releasing this key before the next letter is struck. Space precludes our entering into fuller details, but for our summer number we are preparing a lengthy essay entitled “Shift Lock Secrets”.

“Pro Bono Publico”—Clearly you have been dulling your mind with the childish fantasies of such as M. Jules Verne, until your sense of proportion is quite eroded. The notion that personal typewriters

might be driven by some such fantastic means as electricity is sheer nonsense. Only the huge "mainframe" typewriters of commerce, such as that devised by Mr Edison in 1872, could conceivably operate in such a fashion. Are you afraid of honest toil?

"Thrifty"—You should read our pages with more attention. Each issue contains several advertisements for preparations of soot, lamp-black, boot-polish, et cetera, supposedly suitable for the "rejuvenation" of ribbons. We cannot recommend any one in particular. Your own efforts with oak-galls and household chemicals are perhaps commendable, but imperfect: the ink emits noxious fumes which made our chambers uninhabitable until your letter was removed by the public hangman. We have forwarded his bill to your address.

"Aspirans"—Certainly not! Under no circumstances should any English author take colonials like Mr Mark Twain as setters of precedent in this respect. We dare say publishers in those uncouth parts know no better than to accept type-written submissions. In the British Empire, literary etiquette remains unchanged. You may prepare drafts of your work on the machine, but must write it out in "letter quality" script for the publisher. Vellum and quill pens remain optional.

"Fun-Lover"—Yes. Although the Remington is almost exclusively thought of as a serious machine for the use of authors and businesses alone, many games are indeed available. For example, the advertisement from "Divisions and Pastimes Workshop" on page 94 offers a selection which includes "Consequences", "Acrostics", "Double Acrostics" and "Postman's Knock". Many enthusiasts declare the Remington adaptations of these games to be infinitely superior to the old "manual" versions.

"In Statu Pupillari"—Your tutor or governess has sadly neglected your education. A child of your years should be aware that the typewriter, far from being a new idea, appears in a British Patent as long as ago as 1714. Nor was your letter free from errors of grammar, syntax, layout, punctuation, spelling and diction.

"Blackbeard"—We can take no pleasure in your account of how (no matter with what ingenuity) you have "hacked" the internal mechanisms of Remingtons to effect various claimed improvements. Such tampering is in clear violation of the makers' warranty conditions. We hold it our duty to prevent such bad and dangerous suggestions from reaching our readers. After taking legal advice we must also return your article on the use of a modified machine to generate "official" identification and thus penetrate the Bank of England's ledger system. The notion is in poor taste.

"Wordsallruntogether"—The key you seek is the very wide one which lies closest to you as you operate the mechanism. Contrary to your somewhat petulant implication, we consider the manufacturers to have labelled this clearly and correctly with a picture of a space.

Aunt Davinia will return with further enlightenment next month.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS: I was flipping through the Nebula Awards bulletin (after Ian Watson's grovelling request to add the Cavorite-like weight of my recommendation to his "Slow Birds", currently leading the novelette pack) and for the umpteenth time felt a grating crash of mental gears on sight of the novel title *Where the Ni-Lach*. The first few times I'd thought it must be a misprint. If it weren't for the hyphen, Lach might be a verb and the book would be about where the Ni did it, the filthy beasts. No question mark to make it part of a monosyllabic exchange: "Where the Ni-Lach?" "Tarzan not know. Piss off." Not enough of it to be a detached subordinate clause; it falls flat as aposiopesis; it's about as scienti-fictionally evocative as sandpaper drawn across one's fillings, and there's a hideous and no doubt intended temptation to buy the blasted book and see if context can possibly make sense of that title. Rage, spleen, bile. (Exits in general direction of pub, to a diminuendo mumble of "The her[one] surely couldn't be a member of the noted Ni-Lach cult of quantity surveyors who just happens to be called Where?"

SOMEWHERE NEAR PENRHYNDEUDRAETH

The good thing about this freelancing is that you can declare a holiday whenever you like. The bad thing is that you don't. I dimly remember a time when my Civil Service employers allowed me to take evenings and weekends off....After calculating that we hadn't had a proper holiday for 00000110 years, I realized the computers were eating too deeply into my once sensitive and fannish soul. Hazel packed the car with luxuries (clothes, food); I added the essentials (books, booze); and we rattled off into the sunset, which is also the direction of Wales.

Toiling up through the Marches and the torrid zones of bilingual road-signs, into a landscape of mountains intermittently visible between the sheep, I took notes for a long-planned but never written article on Welsh as she is wrote. The Welsh are eager to confuse the vile *Saeson* or English, but unlike the similarly disposed Irish are hampered by having a relatively straightforward language. Translating the town of Wrexham into *Wrecsam* seems mere perversity, and few *Saeson* are likely to be confused by a *tacsi* rank, a double-decker *bws*, a walk on the seaside *promenad*, an eighteen-hole *cwrs golff*, or a drink at the *clwb* (necessitating a visit to the *toiledau*). In Caernarfon (trans: Carnarvon) Castle, the historical bits include such conundrums as *William I (Y "Concwerwr") o Dapestri Bayeux*. Spoken Welsh is something else, and every evening a hotel TV would gush incomprehensibly: well, almost. "*Llanfairpwyllogwyngyll telefision gogerych-wyrndrobwl social security llantysiliogogoch....*"

This was Gwynedd, the sheep-infested north-west corner of Wales which contains most of the surviving Welsh speakers, notable mountains and tourist traps. (Statistic: Wales houses 1% of the population of the EEC and 15% of its sheep.) Here the planned essay and our fannish street credibility ended with a loud simultaneous bang, at Portmeirion.

To fandom, Portmeirion means Patrick McGoochan's resoundingly triffic 1966 series *The Prisoner*, and by extension its fan club's Portmeirion festivals, and the mild tedium associated with any media group which focuses all its energies on a single cult object. Under that burning-glass of fanatic devotion the object seems to wither, like *Star Trek* actors dwindling from sequel to sequel. Yawn, snooze, and where's the Jacqueline Lichtenberg Appreciation Society when we need it? This is known as prejudice.

But: "We're coming back here," said Hazel before we'd so much as unpacked, and in defiance of all intricate forward planning we spent the rest of our week at Portmeirion. There has probably got to be a reason for this.

Firstly, despite the urgings of common sense, the place wasn't specially tricked out for the "Prisoner" series. Barring a few obvious items (to

the best of my belief there are no sliding doors, craggy subterranean corridors lined with juke-boxes, or rocket launch silos) and some mild surprises (the reality is smaller, and cunning camerawork made it seem to front on open sea rather than a mere estuary), the late Sir Clough Williams-Ellis's village really is like that. It's a colossal folly, a Gothic-Italian dream, a Disneyland of real architecture put together as the...as the fanatic of a real architect.

All is crammed into a tiny fold in the coastline, acombe which funnels down to the estuary while the dottier buildings cling to its sides and the clifftops. Near-garish colours predominate; I can think of no other context in which my aesthetic adviser Hazel would reckon an arched belvedere painted pale mauve looked somehow right. Personally I loved the jackdaw resourcefulness. That sinister Green Dome of the TV series has an impressively intricate façade which turns out to have been half of a giant manorial fireplace. The staggeringly ornate plaster ceiling which posed over us at dinner-time had been transported wholesale from some condemned country house and reassembled from a stack of truck-sized fragments. Seven vast Ionic columns acquired on one of Sir Clough's whims (and then stored for 30 years before use) have been incorporated into the landscape, and we spent a fruitless afternoon hunting for the alleged eighth. Odd salvaged gargoyles, cornices, balustrades, statues, urns, crenellations, arches and colonnades are scattered everywhere...not to mention a brace of cannon and an errant Buddha. Even the part where we stayed (some buildings are "hotel rooms", some are shops, most are self-catering cottages) sported weird bas-reliefs and statue-niches from goodness knows where. The designer modestly called it his Home for Fallen Buildings.

I have a nervous feeling of evoking a mere architectural junk-heap. Actually the overall effect is weirdly integrated and witty. As you wander around, there comes a realization there there are *no* accidental perspectives: viewed from any angle, the place has its own daft perfection. By cunning use of the slopingcombe, a three-storey cottage called Telford's Tower dominates its corner of the skyline. A wholly non-functional "Campanile" stands even taller, and the Dome looms like that of St Paul's. None of these is actually anything like as big as our own perfectly ordinary Victorian house, but dizzy height is forced on you as an optical illusion. Speaking of suggestion, I kept wondering whether the innumerable and inexplicable old paintings of erupting volcanoes which line the walls of the "Town Hall" breakfast- and dining-rooms weren't intended as a cruel allusion to the dreaded holiday tummy....

Around the village are woods big enough to get lost in, which we promptly did, straying among forgotten exotica (bamboo, in North Wales?) and remnants of nineteenth-century gardens—fortunately I was sufficiently out of breath not to recite the whole of Swinburne's "A Forsaken Garden" into the teeth

of the salt wind. A lost beach was heaped with the endless white skeletons of sea urchins; a grim little glade offered forlorn headstones and graves which proved to belong to a bygone someone's dogs. The Gilbert-and-Sullivan spirit of the village didn't penetrate this far, but there was the same sense of infinite remoteness from word processors and bank managers.

The funny thing about Sir Clough's fantasy world is that it's as durable as his favourite Ionic columns—robust enough to absorb and ignore tourists, cars, all the tentacles of a mundane Outside. Portmeirion's façade is curiously solid, with no peeling plastic or fairground impermanence. The spell extends even to the one place which does sort of drop to a different level of unreality: the "Prisoner" souvenir shop, lying behind the very door which in the series opened on Number 6's palatial lodgings. Again all was illusion: there's only one tiny room in there, containing Max Hora.

Max used to live near us in exotic Reading, Berkshire. A leading light of the "Prisoner" society, he's genuinely achieved his own fantasies. Imagine a high-tech fan offered the SF bookshop concession in the Houston control centre, or a John Norman devotee given his own bondage parlour. Max *lives* in Portmeirion, drives a remaindered Mini-Moke from the series, spends his winters writing booklets of "Prisoner" memorabilia, and in the summer flogs them to visitors. This is the place to buy your Patrick McGoochan photos, videos, badges, ballpens, notepaper, postcards and bumper-stickers (adv.). Max will also sell you a "Rover" weather-balloon: mere seconds after our arrival we found him coaxing one to sail across the central piazza's ornamental water, for the nostalgic benefit of yet another visiting TV crew.

I sipped much beer with this entrepreneur (fandom will always find a way), and heard the inner secrets of the tiny community of Portmeirion residents, living in odd corners of Sir Clough's follies like rats in the walls...but the demented magic of the place still didn't fade. Outside in the warm evening, the village was empty and judiciously floodlit. Mere lack of population failed to lessen it or to evoke that grey abandoned-stage-set hollowness: Hazel and I would wander happily around flower-scented paths, past many a Palladian pediment or rococo grotto, until too tired for more. Damned if I try to analyse it further. You had to be there.

As indeed we decided to be, only a few months later, for a full week. Two Welsh holidays in a single year! I still don't know how I managed to justify it to that harsh taskmaster Langford who makes me work such long hours at the keyboard: but a way had to be found, since by the time we got home Hazel had already made a chart and was ticking off the days.

One thing led to another. On and off we've spent several weeks in the place since that great discovery in 1986, and learned that the uncrowded evenings are by far the best times; that it is unwise to

rent the cottage outside whose bedroom window the local peacocks like to emit unbelievably hideous cries; and that falling in love with that whole corner of Wales can lead to the financial madness of buying a holiday flat just down the road in the shadow of Harlech Castle. You don't need to visit so often when, every time you set off from Harlech on a shopping expedition, you can just see Portmeirion across the wide estuary, gleaming like some coveted toy from the pre-plastic era.

Time to hire another car and plan another Harlech trip....

ANSIBLE 40 looks back over five hectic years of publication and, in a flood of sudden nostalgia, decides it's safer not to mention any of the details. Instead, the usual up-to-the-gigasecond news from DAVE LANGFORD....Mailing label runes: LASTISH XX means you're OK to issue XX, SUB DUE means you just stopped being OK, ***** delicately conveys that even if your best friend hasn't pointed it out, you have been non-OK for a detectable period, and TRADE means you're permanently OK until I change my mind. This issue's excursion into culture: "I believe that composing on the typewriter has probably done more than anything else to deteriorate English prose." (Edmund Wilson, 1962). DOES ANYONE read this small print? To test this, I'm putting the Complaints Department here: ... Fulsome apologies to all these afflicted persons.

THE MOVING ACCIDENT

Hazel and I have *actually moved*. We have *changed our address*. (Silence.) An *epic transition*, that's what we've achieved. (More silence.) Come on, surely such a unique and earth-shattering event deserves a round of applause, a shower of sympathy and wreaths, a rushing of International Red Cross parcels to the afflicted zone? ...Oh. Oh, I see. Other people do it too, you say, just as other people get married and spawn and die and (except conceivably in the last case) also regard the whole thing as a pretty cosmic event. You may have a point there, yes, but mere logical argument isn't going to stop me droning on as though I'd just fought World War III over the last couple of weeks, or personally witnessed the coming of the Antichrist, or received an impeccably produced fanzine from Keith Walker.

Long ago and far away—well, a few years ago in our old house a mile away—Hazel and I developed grandiose plans to avoid having to move. Shifting all those books, those typewriters, those filing cabinets, those fanzines, would be a fearful nightmare, we told one another wisely, and how right we were. Our scheme for universal domination and perpetual immobility involved an intricate land-swapping deal which I dreamt up one night after six or seven pints of inspiration. The old house at 22 Northumberland Avenue had a ridiculously long garden (the shed at the far end was only dimly visible through a blue haze of distance, and it was wisest to take a few days' provisions when setting out to trace the lawnmower), while along the side of said garden ran a disused pathway giving access to a local school which actively didn't want access from that side, as evidenced by the thickly rusted lock and chains which gave the iron street-gate a cheery prison aspect.

Phase I of the Master Plan went rumbling into motion as I sent successive letters to the school headmaster, the local education authority, the council planning office, and the Royal County of Berkshire Property Department, plus solicitors, building societies and suchlike riffraff, and (for reasons never too clearly explained) the Superintendent of Parks and Woodland. In phrases too fulsome, verbose and polysyllabic to be set down here—I have *some pride*—these letters contained a thickly camouflaged version of Langford's Plan. Stripped to its simplest terms by ruthless use of Occam's Razor, symbolic logic, and imperfectly recollected episodes of *Foundation*, it went: "I've thought of this way to hugely enhance the value of our property by a land swap which will do no one else any good at all...."

After a pause sufficient for the traditional monkeys to have polished off Shakespeare, submitted all the tragedies to Asimov's and collected a "futility" rejection slip for each, the forces of Berkshire began to move. "Yes," they replied. A year and a half after my letter, our garden became fifty feet shorter and several feet wider, and next to the house there was

now room for a glorious extension to accommodate wild orgies and the ever-increasing book collection, preferably in different rooms. A year after this golden moment, the council even got round to fencing the new bottom of the garden, cutting us off forever from the distant horizon where the shed would have been if it hadn't come to pieces in my rough hands as I struggled to lug it closer to the house. You can imagine what I'm like with fine wine-glasses of cut crystal, when I have this effect on garden sheds.

When it came to removing the six-foot wooden side-fence separating us from our new strip of asphalt garden, Langford the Engine of Destruction was in his element. (*The Plain People of Fandom*: Bet you broke a lot of hammers and tyre-irons doing that. *Me* [startled]: How did you know that?) The rotted wood became a daily bonfire, much admired by the school's warped pupils, who climbed up a still needed section of fence to gape, merrily hurling each other's clothing and exercise books on to the pyre. When they started doing the same with fragments of fence and Hazel's favourite elder-tree, it was time for the fannish intellect to take action. Early one morning I stole down the garden and thickly anointed the top of that fence with gooey black duplicator ink. The sounds which ensued...but I digress.

Manifestly we'd never need to move house now. Illimitable space was ours for the taking, requiring only that we build a few brick walls around it. Starry-eyed, Hazel and I sketched out an extension barely smaller than the original house; only with difficulty did I prevent her from adding minarets and pinnacles, and only with even greater difficulty did she block my plans for a vast cellar from which real beer could be hand-pumped to the office, the library, the dining room, the bedroom....

"Ha," said the architect whom we summoned from the vasty deep. "Wouldn't be surprised if they've got an easement here." With sudden violence he flung back this iron lid set in the newly-acquired land, something we'd hitherto failed to notice, and vanished down a brick shaft into the bowels of the earth. Strange cries echoed from the depths, as though he'd met an alligator or a Harlan Ellison story. He returned slightly flushed, which prefigured his next words: "Main sewer," he carolled happily. "Can't build anything big on that," he continued in a paean of joy. "That plan of yours is right out," he concluded, barely able to contain his ecstasy.

"So?" we asked suspiciously.

"So we'll just have to stick to one storey, that's all, and that means I can find you some standard designs which will be much easier to draw up—"

"It'll be a box!" Hazel shrieked. "I've seen these standard extensions, and always it's a horrible little rectangular box just stuck down there by the side of the house looking like nothing on earth and completely out of keeping with the Edwardian brickwork! A box!"

The architect paled slightly, then rallied and drew himself up to his full height of not very much at all. "Naturally anything which I design will be a symphony of brickwork which at once blends imperceptibly into the original scheme and highlights its inner beauties in an, as it were, contrapuntal mode," he did not say, but it was along those lines. Haughtily he flounced away, while Hazel and I looked at one another with a wild surmise.

And sure enough, with the speed of a striking sex-crazed strooka (my favourite SF simile, culled from Ken Bulmer's remainders), there came a fantastically detailed set of plans, even covering the brand of tea the builders were to drink while not engaged in their traditional 15-minute work break. Hazel looked at the plans. I looked at Hazel, and cowered slightly.

"IT'S A BOX!!!"

"What it is," I said unconvincingly, "is that the flat roof highlights the beauty of our sloping one, as it were contrapuntally, while the robust dissonance of the picture window at the front provides a striking yet satisfying contrast with the totally different design of the existing sash windows. Apart from that, it's a rotten little box."

"Send it back and make him change it," said Hazel with finality.

The small but perfectly formed architect was all too ready to change it, asking only for a few more days of Creative Thought and a corresponding number of noughts added to his fee. "The way you want it, it's more *expensive*," he said plaintively. "I was trying to save you *money*."

"A tent would have been even cheaper, but we didn't order a tent either," I distantly observed, and realized my mistake as a red gleam came into the tiny architectural eyes and somewhere an invisible cash register went *ting* to indicate the swelling of our bill by several pounds' pique money.

More time passed, months creeping by with the glacial inexorability of some vast, ponderous force of nature or even the post office itself. Three years from the formulation of the Master Scheme, we were finally ready with plans, detailed planning permission (without which you are not allowed the smallest erection in this crowded country) and even the all-dreaded building regulations permission (which ensures not only the continued employment of building regulations inspectors but also that whatever you finally construct will be safe, sturdy, enduring and too expensive). It was February, 1982. The glorious transformation of 22 Northumberland Avenue, Reading, into a fannish paradise seemed assured.

Then we called in the builder.

I still have nightmares about the builder.

Ming the Merciless would have gaped in sick envy. The galaxy-smashing supervillains of our favourite literature were relegated to mere delinquents by comparison with the bale-fires of destruction which coruscated in our builder's eyes. Not that he

was unsympathetic: he couldn't wait to start. First he would bore innumerable large holes through the wall of the upstairs front room, heedily disregarding obstacles like plaster and wallpaper.

"But that's my office!" I wailed. "The whole point of building this extension rather than moving is so I can keep working in my office."

After the holes had been gouged out and jacks inserted to stop everything collapsing, the demon builder then proposed to demolish the wall of the room underneath and, with all phasers blasting on maximum intensity, to ravage unchecked through the remaining habitable enclaves downstairs, finally over-running every other room with fire and the sword on the flimsy pretext of rewiring and laying new gas pipes.

Then, it seemed, he would consider building the new bits.

"But," I said, and babbled incoherent things like "7000 books...desks...typewriters...filing cabinets...duplicator...copier...computer...."

"Furniture," Hazel suggested.

"That too."

"All that'll have to go into storage," said Genghis Khan cheerily, unwilling to let mere chattels obstruct his merry path of devastation.

"No," said Hazel, 0.3 nanoseconds after the builder's departure.

"Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new," I agreed,

Like lapsed believers or lapsed atheists who rush at once to the opposite extreme, the failure of our five-year master plan sent us straight out to the forbidden temples of Reading's estate agents.

There was the pushy agent who loudly insisted that we had to sell our house through him as a first priority before even considering beginning to think of looking at any others: he would have done well with the Feckle Freezer Co., but we never dared go back in case he started flogging us insurance, double glazing and encyclopaedias. There were all the dim agents who listened carefully to our demand for a large old house in the university area with at least four bedrooms, and months later were still posting an unending succession of brochures for small modern three-bedroomed shoeboxes in scrofulous new estates several miles outside Reading. There were the reclusive or hermetic agents who wrote down our requirements in tedious detail but for some reason never came up with anything at all—doubtless not real businessfolk but front organizations for the CIA. And there were the friendly agents who'd sold us 22 Northumberland Avenue and even remembered us: can it be that sensitive fannish faces do indeed stick in the mind? Or had I merely been wearing my propeller beanie on both occasions?

We staggered home with a small pantechicon load of papers which (after elimination of anything small, new, misplaced, or liable to make certain critics cry "It's a box!") reduced themselves to three possibles.

Only three? That evening we stalked through fog all round the university area of Reading, which bristled with *FOR SALE* signs bearing the names of already-visited agents who were obviously in a conspiracy to conceal these homes from such unworthy buyers as us. Whenever we enquired about one of these palaces, there'd be a sudden look of consternation from the relevant agent; a panic-stricken search through the records; an emergence with smiles of vast relief: "Ah, we've *just* sold that one...."

As it happened, we only went over three houses and came to a final decision mere days after the quest began. One contained more rooms than we'd ever dreamed of, straggling in a narrow way over four or five storeys with little rooms everywhere: trouble was, there weren't any big rooms, as so necessary for drunken fannish riots and the not all that different meetings of the almost famous "Pieria" writers' mob (wherein non-sober folk like Rob Holdstock, Mike Rohan, Andrew Stephenson, Garry Kilworth *et al* gather together to piss on the newest Langford story. This is all quite democratic since I have the reciprocal right to praise their latest efforts). The second house stank of death, not merely because the owner had died there mere weeks before, but also owing to the jolly decor of brown from top to bottom, the murderously jagged-edged gas mantles (yes, gas mantles) which jutted everywhere and did me an injury not convenient to describe, the vast garden which resembled the Amazon rain forest in everything including size and wrapped the whole gloomy house in a hideous dank embrace....

We bought the third house, 94 London Road, a Victorian semi dating from 1878. It's rambling and peculiar, from the weevil-infested cellar to the upper reaches where thin air makes it difficult to breathe. There are inexplicable oddities like the narrow room twenty-four feet long up on the second-and-a-half story; the mysterious wires and pipes which erupt from walls or ceilings, run a little way and disappear into holes like startled mice; the nodes on various walls where gas-mantle outlets were sealed off, not always successfully, as the Southern Gas emergency service can testify; the apparent cupboards on upper floors which give access to long grimy crawlspaces in the angles of the roof and offer an endless bounty of small birds' skeletons; the skylight which looks not at the sky but into a hidden roofspace lit by two more skylights, one of which is not ours; the owls which hoot and moan high up in the sinister Tower of Flints....Perhaps I exaggerate.

The proprietor of all this was a Mrs Vieri, widow of a button importer, which did at least explain the five million buttons packed in neat boxes up in the attic room. (Not to mention the constant trickle of further buttons which are still emerging from cracks in every floor and skirting-board.) "Actually she's *Lady Vieri*," dribbled the friendly agent, "and I think she's Einstein's granddaughter or

something as well." Every estate agent loves a lord, and Hazel too was much taken by this close encounter of the noble kind—even if she should have learned better after meeting that self-confessedly famous skiffy author Lord St Davids, who in tones of paralysing tedium told her all the things he had done in various wars, several times.

Luckily Mrs Vieri's title proved to be an off-the-peg Italian one picked up via her late hubby, which doesn't really count, so Hazel stopped grovelling and started making friends—to such good effect that we were shifting books into the long-neglected upper rooms of 94 London Road long before actually owning the place. I will only add that Mrs V. was then officially 65, the actual figure of 72 not being admitted except to people she'd known more than say 45 seconds, and was at once extremely small and hideously dynamic: I pale at the thought of her 30-mile walks every Wednesday, not to mention little hobbies like caring for about a dozen "old ladies" of 80-odd, supporting all local hospitals single-handed, and running every charity within ten miles. Sometimes I feel even more useless than I look. However....

However, we had the problem of selling our house. It was easy, as it turned out. Someone walked in, peered around, announced his intention of converting the place to flats (*flats!* It was Ballard's "Bilennium" all over again), and airily made a cash offer. "Selling your house is easy," we bragged for three months while the slow process of buying 94 London Road creaked on: surveys, oaths signed in blood that we would destroy much lovable wildlife (wet rot, weevils, *Anobium punctatum* alias common furniture beetle alias—all right—wood-worm... everything but death-watch) to pacify cruel Sir Jasper at the building society and have him give us a mortgage, lengthy waiting while the people who were selling Mrs V. a house tried to finalize their divorce and decide which half of the house which of them would be selling....

Proposition: No house deal is ever completed. Proof: The people who are moving in have to sell their former house while those moving out have to buy a new one. Extend by induction to infinity. For financial reasons all purchases/sales in this infinite chain need to be completed on the same day. Now, by Murphy's Corollary, at least one transaction in the chain will fall through...The world is only saved by the existence of *first-time* buyers, naive and dewy-eyed creatures who don't have houses to sell and who wonder why estate agents fall upon them with flattery and blandishments. Additionally there are those who leave their homes for the hereafter or (the same as far as disappointed estate agents are concerned) rented flats. This glum aside leads us to:

The disaster came, of course, mere seconds before contracts could be irrevocably exchanged for the Northumberland Avenue sale and the London Road purchase. Our friendly converter of formerly nice houses to flats had had time, after all the delay,

to discover that on the whole Reading Council was inclined to piss from a great height on such perpetrators of vileness. "Quite right too," said Hazel, "except just this once." No chance of planning permission. No chance of our other old friend building regulations permission. Suddenly, after three months during which it hadn't been on the market, we found ourselves the proud owners of an unsold house. The transition was so swift that I'd turned away three prospective buyers with the words "It's sold," before the lethargic estate agents mentioned to me that it wasn't. Everything would have collapsed utterly had I not persuaded another rapacious Sir Jasper at my bank to hand over a vast temporary loan, allowing us to buy the new place with nothing to worry about bar interest rates not as generous as Shylock's.

In mere days we'd sold the house again, this time to a repellent chap from British Rail who came round with his tame builder in tow. Said builder kept going "tut" at things like our wiring, windows, walls, floor, ceiling, roof, doors and other really quite minor points, and at the end of the tour explained that it would cost nearly £3000 to make this rotten little slum inhabitable. Having inhabited it for six years without social obloquy, I felt peeved; but the thought of that bank loan interest made us gulp and accept a slightly insulting offer. As with pimping or writing for Robert Hale, there is no way to deal in property and keep one's pride.

Then it was time to move, a really cheapo economy-style move since we couldn't afford real removal men nor trust them to know which boxes of books were too flimsy to be stacked (the ones labelled *Priceless Masterpieces* of course contained irreplaceable treasure in the shape of books by or featuring me). "Fear not," said mighty Martin Hoare, "I'll repair my lovable old London taxi and we can shift most of the stuff in that." Five years later he still means to repair that taxi, the wheel-rims of which have now sunk interestingly through the tyres.

The alternative low-cost removal van proved to be owned and driven by a vibrant entrepreneur whom Mrs V. continually addressed as "young woman" since Mrs Removals was a mere debutante of 65. From time to time I still have to wander up to that long room three flights of stairs from the front door, and assure myself that these two ladies, plus a Hazel suffering from general prostration, plus ineffectual me, did somehow get our 7000 books up there during a heatwave. It's the sort of achievement which makes Erich von Däniken write books explaining how the primitive, cave-dwelling Reading tribes could never have coped without the aid of flying saucers armed with antigravity winches, teleportation units and gigantic, pyramidal removal men. He would have added a second fleet on discovering our further feat of stuffing all the heavy furniture upstairs as well—as required by the satanic Mortgage Pact, which demanded that the ground floor be woodwormed and damp-proofed real soon now, meaning that every floorboard was at the worm-hunters' mercy....

Shortly afterwards there was a distressing little scene with the man from British Rail, who rang and at great length enumerated all the remedial things which he now realized had to be done to our appalling heap of wattle-and-daub in Northumberland Avenue, things which he claimed to have realized *since* the traumatic verdict of his builder, and anyway, um, er, as it were, he was withdrawing his offer, so there. I suppressed the urge to shout something ideologically unsound like "I suppose you can't afford even a bleeding hut on your pitiful strike pay!" (BR having roused great wrath in me lately by standing between me and many a merry event in London, thanks to being on strike). Subsequently I rang our estate agents to say "That bugger's cocked the whole thing up, soddit!" ["Mr Batten has chosen to reconsider his purchase offer in the light of what he claims to be unacceptable renovation costs."] I'm ashamed to admit being hugely cheered by the response: "Ah, we know about him—don't you listen to what he tells you—he can't afford to buy any house at all now, on account of he's lost his job for being such a militant union agitator that even the union didn't want him around any more...."

Almost instantly we resold the place, to a chap who went to Cambridge: "So he must be all right, mustn't he," said Hazel. "Not as all right as if he'd been to Oxford," I allowed, "but he'll do."

But this tiny saga of horror beyond one fan's comprehension does not come to any tidy end. We had a quick fannish housewarming, largely distinguished by (a) Grand Tours of the house inflicted by Hazel on anyone who dared to scale the heights or plumb the depths; (b) famous Abigail Frost, who took note of Hazel's "no smoking" rule and left for a quick fag—via the front window, offering all of London Road (otherwise known as the A4) a long glimpse of turquoise-stockinged legs, and puffing her way about the front garden in her exotic party ensemble until everyone inside had had the chance to say, "With Abi there you don't need to hang out a red light."

Then Armageddon came. The gasmen found *another* leak (emergency team summoned, huge holes in front garden, Langford returns swayingly from One Tun meeting to find a sign on the front gate saying BEWARE OF THE PIT). The dreaded wormfolk ripped out and replaced (in fetchingly different colours) the various squashy spots of downstairs flooring which proved to be supported by mighty joists whose texture now resembled a loofah. The formerly musty and disgusting cellar sprouted a smart new ceiling, a series of air-vents, a new fuse box (all my own work) and strip lighting, making it inappropriate to install the planned cask of Amontillado. A pervading pong of embalming fluid indicated the chemical damp-proofing injected into all ground-floor walls, the injection holes being filled with the little plastic bungs we still can't help calling tappens. A further pervading pong of vermicide had something to do with the hideous deaths of

innumerable woodworm, at a price suggesting they were individually tracked down by private detective agencies and hit with small gold hammers.

Let's pass over the roof repairs (involving scaffolding which as it was dismantled burst interestingly through the front window to where a visiting Mary and Bill Burns were, briefly, asleep), the endemic woodlice, the Great Slug which ravaged at will over the breakfast-room carpet, the leaky window-frames, the drunken fireplace (quite rectilinear before it was "repaired"), the pigeon-hole (a rotted gap in what builders call the undereave soffit, enabling pigeons to mate noisily in the ceiling over Hazel's sleeping head, not to mention playing Rollerball with bits of loose slate when other amusements palled)...You will get the idea. A 109-year-old house is full-time work for the rest of one's life; but we do rather like it.

"Never again," said Hazel. "We're never going to move again."

"That's what we said in 1976," I dreamily recalled.

"Aaaaargh!" concluded Hazel; and, on the whole, I agree.

MORE SILLY WORDS: My favourite source of horrible neologisms is the otherwise nifty trade newspaper *Computing* (or, as it calls itself, *computing*), which makes the whole thing twice as confusing with a house style whereby acronyms are disguised as real words in lower case. The last word of the previous sentence, had it appeared just like that in *Computing*, would probably have meant Computer Aided Software Engineering—no, I'm not making this up. Similarly, "eft" has little to do with newts (I think it's electronic financial transfer); "pcs" are computers; and "risc", which you've probably met, is not a typo. I'm still waiting for them to refer to a dynamic RAM chip as a wee dram.

THE LEAKY ESTABLISHMENT: THE FINAL DRIPS

I feel a little bit guilty about the subject of this talk. It wasn't entirely my fault; I woke up after chairman Steve Green had *persuaded* me, and found the words "You are giving a Novacon talk on your book *The Leaky Establishment*" tattooed on my typing finger. Dimly I remembered the terrible hours of coercion in the bar, and how Steve finally clinched it by offering me a two-week all-expenses-paid holiday in lovely Ireland at the home of Anne McCaffrey. It was either that or give this talk.

The guilt is because I reckon I'm here on false pretences: I ought to be talking about science fiction, or at any rate fiction, and most of *The Leaky Establishment* is in fact autobiography. It does actually contain an SF idea, and an exceedingly daft one too, but...Once or twice I've read a few chapters to people (this was before all my friends bought earplugs), and was boggled to find that they felt about laughing not at the jokes but at what I thought were ordinary, unfunny details of Civil Service life. Like the routine way in which, in my part of the Civil Service, large randy security men were forever groping your thighs on the pretext of searching for suspicious lumps of plutonium hidden in your jock-strap.

Perhaps I should start by explaining how I ended up chasing neutrons for five years at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment—a job which has failed to impress anybody in the whole world except Greg Benford. "Why did you quit Big Science Biz?" he asked me in tones of concern. I told him how much a grateful British government pays its weapons physicists, and he fainted.

So it is time to tell the true story at last. A story of shame and degradation, of pitiful struggling against implacable necessity, and, above all, of hangovers. Long ago in the mists of 1974 I woke up with a hangover—some things never change—and discovered that all my mates at Oxford had been applying for jobs. I personally had been too busy celebrating my physics finals, such a major event in the Langford career that I celebrated more or less continuously for six months before it happened.

Since I was more sensible then than I am now, I decided not to become a freelance writer. The lure of a free pint of fizzy beer at Novacon 14 was balanced by the fact that in '74 I'd only sold one short story, to Ken Bulmer, for £13.30p payable in several instalments; while my masterpiece "Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid" had merely collected rejection slips, from both the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Accordingly I nipped round to the Oxford careers office and enquired about vacancies for top-salaried executives with a Jag provided by the company. What I cunningly kept up my sleeve for the time being was that at a pinch I was prepared to settle for an Aston Martin.

Of course it turned out that all the really cushy jobs had been snapped up, right down the line from Chairman of ICI to saggar maker's bottom knocker. Sneering at my pitiful grovelling, they explained that there were only five things for late, hungover physicists to apply for, and one of them was a UB40. I went away with the other four application forms and started inventing lies about my star-studded career to date.

Oh dear, it all comes back, like the curry I had at Mancon. I applied to IBM and they lost my application in the infallible data-processing system. I applied to the Post Office, and I needn't tell you how that application got lost. I applied to ICL, famous lame duck, with the promise that my as yet untapped talents could make them even lamer. They actually invited me to spend a luxurious weekend at one of their places, and it was there that I made a huge tactical error—one which I am not repeating this Novacon. I tried to demonstrate what a reliable, responsible programmer I'd make, by not drinking much. I should have known this was a mistake when I reflected that ICL had already taken on Martin Hoare.

What was left was the Ministry of Defence. I approached their interview room with an ominous sense of doom and foreboding—which was in fact another hangover—convinced they were going to expose my pitiful ignorance with sudden trick questions like "Newton's laws of motion: how many are there?" or "E equals mc *what*?" Inside, this evil-looking fellow stared at me with the sort of expression seen on Joseph Nicholas's face as he weighs the literary merits of the latest Perry Rhodan novel. He said: "Mr Langford, just one simple question. Can you explain to me the nature and significance of the Mössbauer effect?"

Thus it was that I became a scientific officer at Aldermaston; and only years after, when I'd shaken the radioactive dust of the place from off my shoes forever, did I tell anyone that the day before that interview, I'd been doing an Oxford physics practical on the Mössbauer effect.

There were a few other formalities, such as being Positively Vetted—which only *sounds* like Civil Service jargon for a vasectomy. Large thugs covered in hideous scars kept breaking down doors to interrogate people about my sexual preferences—I got the impression that they received some slightly inventive answers. At least I've never worked out why at one interview I was shown pictures of melons and asked about my reactions.

Around then came the first of the amazing incidents which I couldn't resist putting into the novel but which nobody can believe really happened. It was my last week in Oxford, the morning after the college ball, and I was rudely awakened at an unnatural hour—about 12 noon, as I remember. I staggered out in my dressing-gown to find another security investigator in the hallway, who explained that while interrogating me for three hours on the previous day

while shining lights in my eyes, he'd forgotten the most important question of all. "Mr Langford," he said, "are you...a homosexual?" Suddenly I had the feeling that my perfectly ordinary dressing-gown was all covered with exotic brocade in the Oscar Wilde fashion. Summoning up all my courage, I said "No." He went away.

Meanwhile, inside my room, a certain lady whose name I will not drag through the mire, but whom I later married, was giggling uncontrollably into the pillow.

My dressing-gown may have caused the Ministry of Defence to doubt, but the balance was tipped in my favour when a month or so later I and several others got arrested for detonating parts of Oxford with fireworks. This apparently showed the right spirit. The Crown Court judge actually said more or less this, and I felt a slight twinge of unease when (after slamming one of my mates with a two-year prison sentence) he expressed pious hopes that Mr Langford's little prank would have no effect on his chosen career in the business of destroying human civilization as we know it.

So I started five surreal years at AWRE Aldermaston, and after the first six months I knew that no matter what it said in the Official Secrets Act, I could get away with putting almost every detail into a novel. Not only would everyone think it sheer fantasy, the MoD itself surely wouldn't dare admit some things were true...One example that didn't get into *Leaky* was the time when as I was sitting casually in the reactor control room drinking tea, a reputable nuclear scientist came sprinting through, clutching an object of classified size [hand gesture] wrapped in a lab coat. This was in fact the core of Britain's Independent Nuclear Deterrent, which my superior officer wished to put away so he could get to the bank before it closed. It occurred to me that had I so much as moved my foot two inches and tripped him, there would have been a lot of interesting bits of plutonium on the floor, and later on some exciting newspaper publicity about the funerals.

As a matter of fact, the way they flung the radioactives around I'm surprised there wasn't a cardboard box by the main exit with a sign saying KEEP BERKSHIRE TIDY—PLEASE PLACE PLUTONIUM HERE. One of my colleagues managed to lose an uranium sample in the 50 yards between his office and the reactor: the area was mostly grass and we waited for ages in hope of seeing the results predicted by the best SF, such as a mutant clump of purple carnivorous grass entangling stray technicians in its deadly tendrils. All that happened was that one patch went a bit brownish, and the scientists stopped picking the mushrooms which every autumn grew round the reactor building in fairy rings. I thought it very sporting of them to let the security police have first pick just for once.

Some extremely nasty radioactive material was also involved in an experiment I designed, an experiment so classified that I can tell you nothing

about it except that it happened in Nevada...By the way, if any of you have actually managed to outwit my publishers and buy a copy of *Leaky*, I have a small correction for the text. Thinking that Nevada was classified, I wrote Arizona instead, and only when the book was published did I find that everyone knew which state the Americans use for their underground tests. (Speaking of which, I came across the interesting fact that in one such test, a beam of radiation was supposed to go through a little hole to do things to a poor defenceless bit of test material—and the beam missed the hole by a quarter of an inch. You may have had misgivings about the American strike capability, but I bet you hadn't realized they could fail to hit something at two hundred yards' range with an atomic bomb.)

Where was I? There was this experimental capsule, whose destination I cannot reveal to you, incredibly fragile yet containing extraordinarily dangerous substances. It stood on a laboratory bench, and all that remained was to put the lid on. A trained British craftsman set to work; the lid stuck and wouldn't go on straight; and he started hitting it with a big hammer. I don't quite remember how I and five other scientists managed to teleport outside the suddenly closed door.

After all this it was no surprise when Aldermaston had its big flap about plutonium contamination. Some people contained so much of the stuff that their doctors were starting to notice it as a weight problem. The famous unofficial signs appeared in the AWRE library, saying "To avoid assembling a critical mass, staff are requested not to gather in groups of more than 5 and to remain at least 0.6 metres apart (1.2 metres if wet)." Everybody who'd so much as looked at the plutonium entry in the periodic table was ordered to report for checking under the Whole Body Monitor, an elaborate device using sophisticated electronics to tell whether or not you still had a whole body. Aldermaston's enthusiasm for investing in this essential safety equipment was so great that the nearest monitor was twenty miles away at Harwell.

I duly went there and had my inmost secrets probed: they warned me that there could be a certain amount of experimental error in the reading, and those of you with an intensive scientific training may judge that this was correct. Here's the letter I eventually received from the Superintendent of Personnel Safety:

Dear Mr Langford,

The estimate of plutonium in the lungs resulting from the whole body monitor tests at AWRE Harwell on 19 October 1978 is minus thirty-nine nanocuries.

This result has been passed to the Dose Evaluation panel for consideration...

You may mock, but I found it strangely reassuring to know I could playfully nibble a full 39 nanocuries of Pu before reaching the zero level of contamination. (By the way, those on the inside never refer to it as

plutonium or Pu: you show you're on friendly first-name terms with the stuff by calling it "plute".) One good reason for my state of extreme purity and cleanliness—at least back in 1978—was that I spent most of my time playing with computers instead of entering the regular Independent Deterrent Egg 'n'Spoon Races. With the Aldermaston computer system, what got contaminated was my brain.

The set-up at AWRE bore about the same relation to real computers as (in the organizational field) the British SF Association Ltd does to IBM. The advanced programming facilities available to Britain's crack nuclear scientists consisted of a wide choice of FORTRAN. The computer itself lived in a sort of blockhouse guarded by swarms of security men almost as merciless and brutal as those at Seacon 84. Nothing could penetrate the system's impregnable defences! Nothing, that is, except the coded information flowing along handy, tappable cables to terminals around and even off the site. By terminals I mean, of course, teletypes. The whole thing must have been under a preservation order as a magnificent example of 1950s industrial archaeology.

Again, I hit the problem of things which people refuse to believe. I had a bit in *Leaky* about an exciting arcade-action Space Invaders game which ran on a teletype. I've given up trying to persuade anyone that this was mere cold historical fact. You had to be there. There was real sense-of-wonder in reading the official manual which went on about the elaborate defences of the AWRE computer operating system, and then finding you could crash the whole network by compiling a perfectly legal program in FORTRAN.

My favourite memory is of a useful little feature which the computer staff themselves proudly offered to users: it was supposed to make it easy to scan through the information you had stored in the machine. It did. It also made it easy to scan through all the secret password files. They took the feature away again quite quickly when I pointed this out; I suggested an OBE for contributions to national security would be in order, but the mean buggers wouldn't give me one.

Computers are boring and I can hear the crash of catatonic bodies in the aisles, but I can't resist telling about the amazing Aldermaston micro. One day somebody had the bright idea of filling a van with radiation detectors so they could cruise the streets just like the TV-licence people, spotting illegal nuclear stockpiles. Like the one accidentally acquired by the hero of my book. (All the van ever did detect, I gather, was a radioactive patch on the road near Mortimer in Berkshire. Fell off the back of a lorry, I suppose.) I drew the short straw and had to suss out a microcomputer to analyse all the rubbish picked up by the detectors—I suppose it would have been embarrassing if hordes of security guards had burst from the van and riddled someone with bullets, only to discover he was merely carrying an outside luminous watch.

The trouble was, this was the MoD and there were budget problems. I could sign for as many things as I liked which cost £50 or less, but the full weight of bureaucracy would land on the back of my neck if I dared write out a single chitty for a forbidden amount like £50.10p. We ended up buying some cheap chips, and persuading a technician to build a micro from scratch, while I spent eight weeks of my life writing machine code for the wretched thing. At last the great unveiling came, and to my ill-concealed surprise the whole shambles worked, and the AWRE bigwigs looked on it and saw that it was good. So of course it was junked. After all, the project could now be given a big budget, and with a big budget there was no point or prestige value in Langford's nasty little shoestring computer. They spent a few thousand on a pretty minicomputer instead, and I was secretly pleased when it failed to work as well.

This was of course quite logical in bureaucratic terms, in the same way that it was logical for the scientists who actually did AWRE's work to inhabit horrible disintegrating wooden huts on the far side of the marshy bit of the site, while mere parasites like typists and security men got luxury purpose-built offices near the main gate. Again, the logic of seniority meant that I had to be secretary of two nuclear policy committees and take all the minutes, my chief qualification being that I was the only person on either committee who was deaf. The solution was to sit next to the committee chairman in an attitude of sycophancy and ignore all distractions, such as other people's voices. Those minutes were Impressionist works of art, whole vistas of unspoken meaning conveyed in a few deft words like "The chairman agreed. The chairman disagreed. The chairman could not endorse the first proposal but was in sympathy with the second..." Scarred by my appalling experiences on such committees, I find I'm now wickedly prejudiced against exciting events like BSFA meetings, even when the speaker is someone charismatic like Alan Dorey. In fact, especially when...no, I mustn't be cruel.

I'm also prejudiced against engineers. My main contact with engineers at Aldermaston was when one rang up, explained that his section had spent two years working on some new and ever so classified substance, and could I now do all the theoretical background work for them in, say, one week? Ever willing to oblige (which means, ever willing to find an excuse for putting off my own urgent work), I asked for some vital information like the density of the stuff. "Density?" he said, as though I'd made a suggestion so obscene he didn't want to admit he understood it. "I'll ring you back," he said. After a week of what I suppose must have been massed research efforts by his entire engineering team, he rang me back. This time he sounded actively hostile: "I've got the information you asked for. We've measured a piece of the material. It's 5mm by 10mm by 25mm, and it weighs umptium grams. Can you

work out the density from that?" Faintly I assured him that with the aid of mainframe computers I probably could.

Speaking of engineers leads naturally to engines and, specifically, cranks. Every so often I'd get appalling wads of badly duplicated bumph in my IN tray: as well as security regulations, there would be new theories of physics submitted to AWRE's front office and passed to the nearest convenient sucker (me), just in case they contained the ultimate secret of life, the Universe and everything. One chap had a brilliant, self-consistent theory of atomic and nuclear structure: I particularly liked the way in which every single element as yet discovered by science was a special case, an exception which proved the fellow's general rule. One of the predictions of this revolutionary theory was that nuclear weapons couldn't possibly work, and I thought it kind of the author to let us know. However, I was prejudiced against him because he didn't even believe in the Mössbauer effect....

The best bit of alternative science to land on my desk was Robert Kingsley Morison's *An Experiment with Space*, which I have here—

Strenuous but pathetic attempts have been made by terrestrial air forces to obtain possession of extraterrestrial knowledge by capturing an alien space vehicle....This book suggests a more sensible approach. *An Experiment with Space* not only lessens the chance of a national monopoly on levitation but also takes us beyond the stage of idolizing the Space Brothers. Robert Morison conceived a simple idea for generating levitational forces in 1969; but not until August 1979 could he assemble enough scientific and philosophical thoughts for a book. Anyone who succeeds in mastering gravity will make possible a vast expansion of humanity's horizons—thus enabling men to change.

He doesn't say what it'll enable women to do. Anyway, the front cover blurb spills the Secret: "Internal vortex lifts 9-metre disc by space dynamics: angular velocities of 20000 to 40000 revs/min mean molecules moving at 11 km/s. YOUR PLANET NEEDS YOU to consider and investigate possibilities that may radically transform civilization. Like neutralizing gravity and debunking materialism." The general idea is that molecules at the edge of this spinning disc are moving at orbital velocity and therefore the whole disc will naturally drift off into orbit. One of us dropped the author a note asking why CERN at Geneva, with particles circling its storage rings at nearly the speed of light, hadn't passed the orbit of Pluto long ago. I understand the reply was that that was part of the worldwide cover-up, and that to fool the public CERN had been secretly bolted down.

My collection of anecdotes about the horrible

grotteness of Aldermaston used to be endless. Those MoD policemen fondling helpless young scientific officers' thighs. The amazing gate security system whereby all attempts to smuggle out plutonium were presumed to happen in the evening so there was no need to spot-check people or cars at lunchtime (this, no doubt, based on close study of office hours at the Kremlin). The 5-megawatt reactor from the days before the energy crisis was invented, which blithely threw away its entire heat output into the surrounding air (yes, it was a swimming-pool reactor; yes, somebody did fall in). The even more conservation-conscious site heating, with live steam being carried round a five-mile perimeter fence by above-ground pipes which not only leaked at the joints but to boost heat-loss by radiation were painted black. The Royal Visit with the Queen being treated to a display of amazingly incontinent MoD guard-dogs. The local newspaper which really believed and printed the story that AWRE scientists had to drink twelve pints of beer each day to flush neutron contamination from their bodies....

Well, I could go on forever, and by the time I'd finished writing the bloody book—including all this and more—I felt I had gone on forever. (The same drained feeling is experienced by many people who've read it.) So for further sordid details I refer you to the novel itself: just go to any major bookshop and they will explain they've never heard of it. Except for Rog Peyton, who with a huge and enthusiastic smile will say, "Sold out." That's the hardback: I'm glad to say Sphere Books decided to publish a paperback conveniently in time for Novacon, but unfortunately they picked Novacon 15.

I got out of Aldermaston in 1980 for half a dozen reasons. One was that, as I've said until even I am bored with hearing me say it, I found I was earning less than civil servants who were of technically lower rank but worked in boom areas like the Department of Unemployment: this was galling to my elitist soul. Again, Joseph Nicholas used to spit on me in the streets, and big Rob Holdstock would accost me saying, "I want to know what you do vivisectioning those poor neutrons at Aldermaston: I won't understand a word of it but I have a right to know!" Again, the MoD mandarins wouldn't even let me take unpaid leave to extend my coming TAFF trip to America. Again, I had contracts to write some books and wanted to do them in peace, without security men poking their soiled fingers into my nice clean prose as they did with *War in 2080*: "We don't like the implication here that neutron bombs are harmful," they would complain. I had actually written that neutron bombs would kill more people for a given size of explosion: the preferred way of putting it was that "enhanced-radiation devices require a lower energy yield for the same military effectiveness" and are thus jolly good for the environment. Other reasons for disaffection included conscience, an ever-growing dislike of having my thighs groped, and the thought that one day I could write rude things about

the whole place....

You may wonder whether any of these rude things got me into trouble. I did have one alarming phonecall: "This is Aldermaston Security. We're somewhat upset by this book of yours, *The Leaky Establishment*, and we'd advise that all copies be immediately withdrawn from sale pending a possible court action." While I was still saying fluent things like "But" and having heart attacks, the voice burst into coarse laughter and revealed itself to be my (former) friend Paul Barnett, alias John Grant. By way of apology he dedicated the next John Grant book to Hazel and me, but Hazel in particular is not wholly certain that this is a high honour. The book is called *The Truth About the Flaming Ghoulies*.

I wrote my first rude things about AWRE in *New Scientist*, under a pseudonym of course—"Roy Tappen", who later became the hero of the book. Following this...well, here are the inner secrets of how books get commissioned. Maxim Jakubowski had told me it was worth going round to Frederick Muller Ltd with a few book proposals, because they were owned by Harlech TV, had pots of money and gave you super expense-account lunches. So I made an appointment to drop in and discuss a heap of brilliant book ideas which I then quickly wrote. "What time?" they asked. "Oh," I said casually, "how about an hour before lunch?"

Katie Cohen, the Muller editor, smiled sweetly as she tore each of my ideas to tiny little shreds until there was a hollow reverberating emptiness in both my briefcase and my brain. "You haven't any more ideas?" she said. In panic I searched my pockets and found a crumpled xerox of the *New Scientist* article, and said "Maybe I could base something on this, sort of semi-autobiographical...." For the next half-hour Katie did the most brilliant selling job I've seen, convincing herself what a wonderful novel this could be, while I sat there, silent except for strange inner rumbles and hoping for lunch. At last she looked at her watch.... "Send us a synopsis and we'll send you a contract," she said. "And now I'll have to say goodbye because I'm lunching with someone."

After that, there seemed nothing to do but write the book—otherwise the day would have been wasted altogether. The trouble is that, having disposed of that particular section of my autobiography, the next novel should logically be about the joys of freelance writing and how proud one feels to create the vital raw materials of the remainder trade. This, alas, is the sort of thing that's so depressing, it's fit for nothing but the Booker Prize shortlist. Maybe I'll write a relatively cheerful SF novel about nuclear holocaust instead.

If so, I must try to pick a better title than *The Leaky Establishment*—the problem with which is that if you mention it often enough to an audience, the word "leaky" has a subliminal effect and people keep leaving for the toilet. In fact it's beginning to work on me as well, and if you don't mind, I'd like to be excused....

FIZZ! BUZZ!

Chatting recently about timeless values of human culture such as the price of booze, I had a moment of feeling desperately old. In a relative sense: Chuch Harris remembers with a gloat how he achieved beer bloat for only half a goat or a quarter of a goat, and doubtless Harry Warner's early memoirs record the first hairy eofan rubbing two yeasts together and crying "Eureka! I've invented hangovers!" My own sense of crabbed antiquity comes when young fans hear with open disbelief my senile reminiscence of, "When I started drinking beer, this stuff was one and fourpence a pint...."

It wasn't "this stuff", of course, but some foul fizz served in the pothouses of South Wales to schoolboys who didn't know any better. Knowing better and making my lemon-sucking face at the mere memory of the bouquet, I mused that even at 7p a pint I wouldn't fancy the muck now... though one does pay thirteen or fourteen times as much for something very similar in the average con hotel. Then memories started trickling back: Proust sailed into the wastes of lost time at the remembered nibble of a biscuit, but Langford is made of sterner stuff. The remembered taste of iron filings....*In beer veritas.*

There would be half a dozen of us in those smoky pub sessions, all from the now vanished Newport High School, thrown together by vague friendship, throbbing absence of girlfriends, and the natural human urge not to be at home with one's parents. Long evenings of this noble if negative pursuit had to be got through; it was my ever-evil pal Dai Price who introduced the familiar and direly hazardous game Fizz-Buzz.

If you are very lucky, you won't have met it. Semi-drunken cretins sit in a circle, counting in turn, clockwise round the ring: "One." "Two." "Three." At five, and every subsequent multiple of five, the current sucker must instead give a stentorian cry of "Fizz!" At seven, and its multiples, the word is "Buzz!" and the order of play reverses direction. Anyone failing to make the right noise at the right time must take a huge swig from his beer (amateur rules), drain the glass and buy another (tournament rules), or knock back any drinks in front of him and buy a round for the entire party (insane idiot rules).

Well, it beat South Wales's two permissible conversational topics: women (deeply frustrating since none of us knew any) and rugby (even more frustrating since, precociously beer-raddled, we couldn't play the national game without wheezing and falling over).

There was actually a weird satisfaction in doing this daft business right, "the solemn intoxication which comes of intricate ritual faultlessly performed" (thus Dorothy Sayers on bell-ringing—except that the ritual wasn't *that* intricate, and even the double thrill of "Fizz Buzz!" at multiples of 35 failed somehow to

reach orgasm level.

Thus Dai and I concluded that the "game" lacked intellectual challenge, at least until so late in the evening that remembering one's name also began to present difficulties on the order of Fermat's Last Theorem. Tentatively we started attaching electrodes to the hitherto sluggish rules. One early experiment, which even the thickest of the gathering could handle, was to assign "Oink!" as the, er, buzzword for all multiples of 3. Dai soon developed a particularly obscene "Oink!" whose mere enunciation came under the heading of gamesmanship. The corpse of the rotten game began to twitch slightly.

"Burp!" for multiples of 11 was the next remorselessly logical addition. By now, some of us were sweating, concentrating intently, and falling over a good deal sooner than of yore (see above, under Tournament Rules). Then came a quantum leap into genuine mathematical abstraction: "Clang!" was what you had to say each time the count reached a prime number. (After savage debate, the dogma of pure mathematics was cast aside and I was ruled to be a prime.) It was around this stage that I stopped remembering petty things like closing times or how I'd got home afterwards. Sanity was finally eroded by the two-pronged introduction of "Pow!" for perfect squares and "Zap!" for powers of two. Was 1 a perfect square? (Yes.) Was it a power of two? (We decided that $1=2^0$ was a special case and didn't count.)

By now, the alert and intelligent reader will have gathered, there were no bloody landmarks. Pale, strained faces ringed the table, suddenly trying to follow a count which began not 1 2 3 4 but "Clang Pow!" "Clang Zap!" "Oink Clang!" "Pow Zap!" (There was some arcane rule about the order in which you had to pronounce the shibboleths, but this luckily escapes me.) And it was a supreme moment of triumph if, swaying and incapable, we successfully galloped into the straight with "Oink Buzz!" "Burp!" "Clang!" "Oink!" "Fizz Pow!"...and, at last, the first number in our counting system which came through in clear. "Twenty-six!"

I have never quite worked out what the other pub regulars thought of us, but they used to look worried.

The suggestion of "Ping!" to mark cubes was perhaps unnecessary. Perfect numbers also received short shrift. The whole thing broke up with a serious Dai Price plan to insert a special term for members of the Fibonacci series. ("As you well know, Professor, this runs 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34...not that you need to be told, but we must assume there are some ignorant readers out there." "Quite, Carruthers. Shut up.") An appropriate word in this context might have been, "Argh!" Rather than debate whether 1 should now be intricately coded as "Argh Argh Clang Pow!" owing to its double appearance in the series, we all went to university instead.

I arrived in Oxford, and many splendours and miseries duly followed, but the demented game

wasn't so easily escaped—not merely because I inflicted it on university SF group fanatics who madly programmed the Nuclear Physics Dept computers to generate all the correct responses, up to ten thousand. (When I write *Advanced Fizz-Buzz—the Dungeon Master's Guide*, I'll know where to do the research.) Though in a weird way I owe a lot to Fizz-Buzz, such as a lifelong interest in maths, those nonsense sequences were bloody hard to shake off. *Tenser, said the Tensor...Tenser, said the Tensor....* People claim to have been driven half round the twist by obsession with Charles Hinton's coloured cubes for visualizing the fourth dimension (*circa* 1904). Not being quite intellectually up to that, I still suffered years of fizzes and oinks and clangs running round in my head like mathematically-minded squirrels. It didn't even have the vague aesthetic respectability of something like Mark Twain's supposedly unforgettable jingle *Punch, brothers, punch with care! Punch in the presence of the passenjare!*

(En route I also invented numerous variants like Cantorian Fizz-Buzz, played with all the real numbers between 0 and 1 with special grunts for transcendentals—you go first, thanks; Big Fizz-Buzz, in which anyone reaching the first transfinite ordinal during the course of a normal pub session must pronounce the rune "Someone's Been Cheating!"; and, after a crippling attack of Douglas Hofstadter, Self-Referential Fizz-Buzz incorporating Strange Loops....)

The funny noises within my skull did eventually fade away, but as a possible side-effect I seem to have spent most of my working life doing vaguely mathematical things, from doomsday-weapon simulations to back-of-an-envelope futurology. This abysmal nostalgic wallow has therefore given me the final answer to those who mumble about wasting time in pubs. Placing a hand on my chest and speaking in manly resonant tones, I can say: "I owe my whole career to lousy bitter and Fizz-Buzz." (Death comes on swift wings to anyone who responds, "What career?") Of course it's kept me from certain pinnacles: my failure to write *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* can be blamed entirely on my schoolday conditioning to think that, for the reasons above, 26 is an infinitely funnier punchline than "Oink Buzz!". I mean, damn it, funnier than 42....

THE SCIENCE FICTION EPIC THAT BEGAN WHERE EVERYTHING ENDED CONTINUES!—this toothsome Del Rey blurb lingers in the mind though the actual book doesn't.

THUD & BLUNDER

The essence of "Golden Age" detective fiction was that the author should outsmart the reader. However, after smiting your forehead once too often in admiration of all that ingenuity, you could begin to develop a slight headache and hope that sooner or later the wretched authors would outsmart themselves.

It happened fairly often, of course. Dorothy Sayers's fictional mouthpiece Harriet Vane confessed quite cheerfully that she never wrote a whodunnit without six major howlers. Some authors would chart their corpse's steady drift down the Thames to sea, forgetting the complications produced by the fact that (as A. P. Herbert testily told them in the 1930s) the river below Teddington is tidal. Others planned murder with electrified doorknobs, chessmen, teapots—with never a thought for a decent earth or return circuit, without which the victim is apt to say, "I felt a funny tingle," and stroll on.

Mistakes big enough to ruin the story are rare. Here, though, are four examples from famous authors....

In its early days, the Ellery Queen writing team made a great point of using remorseless, watertight logic and playing utterly fair with the reader. It would thus be fun to catch the Queens in a massive error of pure logic.

Sure enough, this happened in *The Greek Coffin Mystery* (1932), one of those confections of elaborate false clues and solutions. An important red herring depends on the colour of a red or possibly green silk tie. The confusion arises because...wait for it...a minor character is colour-blind and therefore (the Queens insist) consistently and unambiguously sees red ties as green ones *and vice-versa*.

This is reminiscent of that theory that abnormally tall, thin figures in El Greco's paintings show that the artist suffered from an eye defect, presumably astigmatism, which caused him to see people as oddly tall and thin. Obviously the questions to ask are: (a) Assuming the eye trouble, how did El Greco see his own canvas? (b) If someone can always tell red from green, how could he ever get their names mixed up? Having thus reasoned that the "colour-blind" chap must be a liar and villain, I was disappointed when the inexorable logical analysis never again mentioned him.

It was equally dismaying to fall through the flaw in a book by the late great John Dickson Carr, whose macabre working-up of suspense might sometimes have become clichéd, but who outstripped everyone else in the ingenuity of his eighty-odd variants on the Impossible Crime in the Locked Room.

In *The Case of the Constant Suicides*, alas, Carr's research slipped. "Carbonic acid gas...one of the deadliest and quickest-acting gases there is" is cunningly administered in a chamber with no gas fittings, no gas cylinders, no chemicals or apparatus

which could have produced gas. The idea looked promising and, in 1941, novel. The snag was that Carr got carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide mixed up, and the evil mastermind was supposed to have done his deed by placing, under the bed, a deadly block of quick-acting dry ice.

(In fact, since CO₂ will eventually suffocate you quite as handily as any other sort-of-inert gas, the book could easily have been patched up by dropping the rubbish about "deadly" and "quick-acting", and the scene where someone nearly faints at one whiff of the fatal vapour.)

Sometimes, as above, the author's gimmick is so neat that to invoke the real world seems cruel and unfair. "The great tragedy of science—the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact." The same tragedy afflicts the book which I suspect is Dorothy Sayers's best, *The Documents in the Case* (1930).

The gimmick of *Documents* appeals hugely to my personal technophilia. Its plot turns on the proving of the "unprovable"—whether the organic poison in the fatal fungi was natural (making the death a mere misadventure) or a deliberately added, chemically identical synthetic. Enter that little-used forensic gadget, the polariscope....

The technical points are that asymmetric, organic molecules will twist the polarization of transmitted light according to their "handedness"; that only one of the two mirror-image forms of such a molecule is produced in living tissue; that a synthetic will be a equal mixture of both forms with the left-hand and right-hand "twists" cancelling out; and that, viewed in the polariscope, the natural poison is thus optically active while the synthetic is inert. No wonder the book's last page has the Director of Public Prosecutions gloomily imagining "expert witnesses displaying an asymmetric molecule to a jury of honest tradesmen....".

Poor Dorothy Sayers. "There was nothing wrong with the plot," she said bitterly in 1932, "except those infernal toadstools." The selected poison was muscarine, being the reason why the Fly Agaric fungus is not a reliable health food. And muscarine *isn't* optically active: no version of it, natural or synthetic, would do anything exciting in a polariscope at all.

Sherlock Holmes seemed to have a far more, dare we say it, elementary lapse in "The Priory School", where he deduces the direction of travel of a long-gone bicycle from its tracks on open ground: "The more deeply sunk impression is, of course, the hind wheel, upon which the weight rests. You perceive several places where it has passed across and obliterated the more shallow mark of the front one. It was undoubtedly heading away from the school."

Presumably, had the front-wheel track overlaid the back one, that would have indicated the opposite direction. But few criminals are so fiendishly cunning as to ride their bicycles backwards.

This time, there's an extra twist. After years of

being taunted about these tracks, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle finally went out and experimented with his own bicycle. While admitting that the original deduction was flawed, he defiantly pointed out that "on an undulating moor the wheels make a deeper impression uphill and a more shallow one downhill, so Holmes was justified of his wisdom after all."

You know my methods, Watson....

OBITUARY (1979-1987)

Ansible passed away peacefully somewhere in the war-torn aftermath of the 1987 Worldcon. In its best years, whenever they were, it was generally agreed that this fanzine had done great things for semicolons. Indeed, the entire cyberpunk movement is clearly influenced by the seminal production values of issue 2/3 (a testament to the artistic effect of runny duplicator ink on shiny paper). Later, though, there came a decline. After major bypass surgery to the colophon, the sadly self-indulgent *Ansible* 666 concerned itself entirely with flatulent discussions about the protocol of stapling fanzines ("My teeth gritted, and the stapler went *spung*"). The final, posthumous issues were so rambling, ill-written and ineptly edited that they earned the scorn of all true SF aficionados by becoming best-sellers, and there were angry scenes when one of these insults to science fiction was bloc-voted on to the Hugo shortlist by the sinister and hateful cult of "Britfan-ologists", already proven by Los Angeles researchers to have been collectively responsible for the Holocaust and the postal system. Although the special Conspiracy '87 *Ansible* was a large and imposing edifice, well suited to a Worldcon despite the poor state of repair, it cannot be denied that its manager was drunk and behaved appallingly. Let us pass over the later controversy and the sadness of *Ansible*'s lonely, alcoholic end...and look back on the period of its greatness, believed to have appeared at the end of a sentence in issue 28.

BOUND AND GAGGED

Once upon a time, being regularly tied up with stout ropes was not so much a luxury offered by strict disciplinarians in Soho...more a regular occupational hazard of thriller heroes. And, of course, their girlfriends.

As a plot mechanism, having our hero tied up serves several useful purposes. The writer gets a rest from the exhausting work of writing action-packed adventure. The villain can gloat sinisterly about how this locked cellar will shortly fill with water, gas or rabid hamsters, while the Iron Maiden swings inexorably closed, the concealed time-bomb ticks towards detonation, etc. And our hero will presently display his ingenuity by freeing himself with one mighty bound.

But how many ways are there to escape a scientifically knotted cocoon of stout manila rope? For my instant survey I passed over James Bond (who despite his name is not trussed up often enough to be statistically significant) in favour of Leslie Charteris's hero Simon Templar—the Saint. Anticipating postmodernism, the tied-up Saint likes to harangue gloating villains: "I've got such a lot more to do before the end of the volume, and it'd wreck the whole show if I went and got bumped off in the first story...." (*The Saint vs Scotland Yard*, 1932.)

Let us be statistical.

Excluding omnibus volumes, ghastly TV-series fictionalizations, and one disappointing novel ghosted by Harry Harrison of SF fame (*Vendetta for the Saint*, 1965), there are thirty-six "canonical" Saint books stretching from 1928 to 1964. Over such a period anyone might change, and the Saint certainly does. Progressing from beer-drinking dealer of rough justice to suave jet-setter and wine connoisseur, he put away childish things, among them the simple pleasure of being roped and tied.

World War II marks the division. Up to 1945 there are twenty-five books in which the Saint is tied up (by my count) no fewer than seventeen times, averaging a 68% bondage factor per volume. If you add notable occasions on which he's locked away (in jails, cellars, one ship's cabin and one ordinary room), the figure rises to 92%. After the war Templar doesn't seem to get tied up at all.

Did Charteris tire of the good old routine? Perhaps, but my suspicion that these episodes exist mainly as narrative padding is supported by the fact that the Saint is never tied up in short stories. Ritual trussing and escape use too many of a mere few thousand words, and after 1948 all the canonical Saint stories are shorts. (Before, many were novellas—much roomier, at two or three per volume.)

Any Charteris villain would have been glad of the following data, showing precisely what tactics to avoid:

Before you tie up Simon Templar, it's most advisable to search him. Fifty-nine percent of his

amazing escapes involve simply cutting the ropes, since in a rather un-English way he keeps a knife up his sleeve. Arch-criminals neglect the importance of taking this implement away, perhaps because the ploy was tried in the Saint's first book (*The Saint Meets the Tiger*, 1928), and the impudent fellow proved to have a razor-edged cigarette case in reserve.

Admittedly, the Saint is versatile with his knife. On two occasions, even while the arch-fiend is gloating at him, he keeps up a stream of repartee while imperceptibly slicing away behind his back. When dropped into the Thames, securely attached to fifty pounds of scrap iron, he holds his breath and patiently works the knife free (*The Saint Goes On*, 1934). Suspended from an iron ring with a hundredweight block of stone roped to his feet, he goads the villain into using his knife to cut the rope which supports Templar by the wrists—whereupon, rather than plummet to death, he grabs the ring one-handed, pulls his other hand loose and, while supporting his own weight and the stone's with his right hand, puts a firm half-nelson on the Napoleon of Crime with his left. Blimey. (*The Ace of Knaves*, 1937.) Dangling from another iron ring in traditional dungeon style, he abandons shoes and socks to wield the inevitable knife with his toes (*The Saint On Guard*, 1945).

Other errors for the Ungodly to avoid are:

Being bluffed into releasing your victims and hauling them out of range of the bomb you have placed under the floor (*Enter the Saint*, 1930).

Accidentally dropping your key to the mantrap in which you have caught the Saint, within his reach (*The Saint Meets His Match*, 1931).

Allowing your attention to stray as you mix tons of cement to entomb him, thus permitting him to char his bonds with a girlfriend's cigarette lighter and escape without your knowledge from the deep pit you are in process of filling up (*The Saint vs Scotland Yard*).

Having him whipped by a gigantic black torturer; the first lash will so enrage him that he bursts thick leather straps with insane strength (*ibid*).

Elsewhere, Templar relies on confederates to free him, abrades his bonds by conventional use of rough brickwork, or—mystifyingly—distracts his captors with a trick exploding cigarette, invokes the spirit of Houdini, and slips free of formerly quite secure knots.

Those who merely lock him up do no better, since they madly allow him to retain a palmed lockpick (*Saint Overboard*, 1936), a complete set of burglar's tools (*The Saint in London*, 1934), or two beer bottles which he can fill with earth as a makeshift respirator to survive the poison gas while digging his way out of the cellar (*Alias the Saint*, 1931).

One hardly likes to complain about these plot devices being incredibly crude, when the tales themselves are usually great fun. Far more soothing to call it sportsmanship; any villain with a sense of

style leaves some loophole in his trap.

Indeed, this also applies to heroes. Simon Templar himself is not terribly good at holding on to prisoners. After one ruffian in *The Saint vs Scotland Yard* has spent all night hacking a huge hole through our hero's own massive cellar door, we are told: "Simon realized that he had been incredibly careless." You bet. What totally unexpected means of escape had he overlooked? He'd left his captive with a knife....

THE BIG PICTURE: The scene was a panel about fantasy at which Peter Weston had decided to defend the old, true ways in a last-ditch stand for real science fiction with real rivets, as opposed to that horrid fantasy stuff. He was first to speak, and he began with the fabled Weston Venn Diagram.

Fortunately there was this big flip-chart pad left over from the previous programme item. (Yes, there were two programme items that day! Novacon gets more exciting each year.) Seizing a felt pen, Peter dramatically drew a big circle. "This," he said ringingly, "is Literature. And this"—a smaller circle within, a tone of voice modulating to bitter contempt—"is Fantasy." Within that he put a solid red blot to represent beleaguered SF, ringed in by the forces of darkness but bravely holding on to its belief that every question can be scientifically answered (I don't think Peter has quite got the hang of Gödel's Theorem), and working within the strict but rewarding limits of conformity to scientific law as we know it (e.g. faster-than-light drives, antigravity, time travel, etc.).

THE WORST CRIME IN THE WORLD

There's an eerie, phosphorescent glamour in dire writing. The legendary *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* has been endlessly reprinted and imitated since 1930. Bad movies and bad SF (especially bad SF movies) have had similar loving attention in recent years. What about rotten crime fiction?

S. J. Perelman pioneered its study with his 1930s squib "Somewhere a Roscoe", extolling Robert Leslie Bellem's work for pulp magazines like *Spicy Detective*. This private-eye genre was highly formalized. A gun was always a roscow, and never went Bang but said—or sneezed, belched, stuttered or barked—"Kachow!", "Chow-chow!", "Chow!", "Kachowp!", "Whr-r-rang!" or in extreme cases "Blooeey—Blooeey—Blooeey!"

Similarly, the corpses (mostly voluptuous; "the warmth of her slim young form set fire to my arterial system", etc) all got variants of the same stylized epitaph. "She was dead as": a pork chop, a stuffed mongoose, an iced catfish, a fried oyster, six buckets of fish bait, vaudeville, George Washington's cherry tree....

A later scholar, Bill Pronzini, has widened the investigation in *Gun in Cheek* (Mysterious Press, 1982) and *Son of Gun in Cheek* (ditto, 1987). Sometimes he struggles to extract humour from material which is merely God-awful, but many unspeakable gems are unearthed and Pronzini has the affection for his victims without which no celebration of appallingness can succeed.

Here's a tiny selection, illustrating the special qualities needed by what Pronzini calls "alternate crime classics":

EMOTIONAL EXCESS. "He rushed to the canal, sobbing, and, with a prayer...threw himself into the water. Happily, in his despair, the poor child had forgotten that he knew how to swim." (Gaston Leroux, *The Perfume of the Lady in Black*) "The fire from my ears, my eyes and my throat congregated into a lump and shoved off the top of my head." (Michael Morgan, *Decoy*)

GENRE INCESTUOUSNESS. "Zarzour looked like a murderer—he acted like one—and he kept talking about committing the perfect crime. Now according to every precept of mystery fiction, he definitely should not have been the actual killer!" (Eric Heath, *Murder of a Mystery Writer*)

STRIKING WOMEN. "She was as lovely as a girl could be without bludgeoning your endocrines." (Stephen Marlowe, *Killers Are My Meat*) "She...unearthed one of her fantastic breasts from the folds of her sheath skirt." (Michael Avallone, *The Horrible Man*) "I looked at her breasts jutting against the soft fabric of her dress, nipples like split infinitives." (Max Byrd, *Fly Away Jill*)

PROFOUND DEDUCTIONS. "It was evident by

the look of fear in his eyes that he was frightened." (Thomas K. Makagon, *All Killers Aren't Ugly*) "He had been shot, poisoned, stabbed and strangled. Either someone had really had it in for him or four people had killed him. Or else it was the cleverest suicide I'd ever heard of." (Richard S. Prather, *Take a Murder, Darling*) "Let's not forget, in the midst of all this fun, that whoever killed this guy is a killer." (Shelley Singer, *Free Draw*)

SINISTERLY MALFORMED VILLAINS. "I feel it in my hump that something is going to happen!" (Edward Woodward, *The House of Terror*) "Freddie's tongue shot out from between his lips like the fangs of a poisonous snake." (J. C. Lenehan, *The Tunnel Mystery*)

THE INVESTIGATOR GETTING KNOCKED OUT. "Somebody stuck a red-hot poker in my ear and all my brains ran out of the hole. My bones turned into macaroni and I sank down into a gooey mass of tomato sauce that looked like blood. Then somebody began rubbing the end of my nose with sandpaper and there was a big balloon of pain tied to my ear." (Carl D. Hodges, *Naked Villainy*)

ATMOSPHERE. "The air was surcharged with an invisible something which seemed to surround the house. Even that phlegmatic, nerve-proof group were not immune to the tuning in of the premonitory cross-currents." (Florence M. Pettee, *The Palgrave Mummy*) "That was my first look at Merriwether Manor, where Murder had rented a room ahead of me." (Jeremy Lane, *Death to Drumbeat*) "The anticlimax was terrific, it was catastrophic." (Arthur M. Chase, *Peril at the Spy Nest*)

HANDGUN EXPERTISE. "Lieutenant Freevich had fired almost a complete round of ammunition." (Hugh Pentecost, *The Steel Palace*)

DETECTIVE INTROSPECTION. "Inspiration splattered me in the face like a custard pie." (Michael Morgan, *Nine More Lives*)

DRAMATIC TAUTOLOGY. "'What?' I monosyllabled." (Florence M. Pettee, "The Clue from the Tempest") "Simeon Taylor was killed—beheaded and left to die...." (Hugh Pentecost, *Sow Death, Reap Death*)

CUNNING MURDER METHODS. By fire extinguisher: "They...stuck a nozzle in each ear while they held her down and turned the extinguishers on." (Ennis Willie, *The Case of the Loaded Garter Holster*) By vacuum cleaner: "He held it there until he had drawn every drop of air from her body." (Sidney A. Porcelain, *The Crimson Cat Murders*)

STIFF UPPER LIP (BRITS ONLY). "I say, Fitzhugh, why not go to the club? Nobody could touch you at the club!" Fitzhugh's lips twitched queerly. "I—er—I imagine I'd be asked to resign if a gang of Chinese murderers came into the club after me." (Murray Leinster, *Murder Will Out*)

Enough. Pronzini offers several hundred pages of similar treats, recommended to all crime fans and/or masochists. People who like books like these will like these books.

Some masters of awful detection do emerge, so outrageous they're arguably good: McGonagalls of crime. Perelman's favourite, Bellem, is just one. The hideously productive Michael Avallone pushes the wise-guy school of cliché to fresh depths ("My bewilderment took on a couple of new glands."). My own soft spot is for the stupefying plots of Harry Stephen Keeler, driven by creaky engines of implausibility and coincidence...like the one where the Hidden Last Will and Testament (I think it was) is splashed across the country on garish advertising posters which reveal their message only through *The Blue Spectacles* of the title. Another typical Keeler plot turn, which thrilled me when I was about fifteen, features a night train hurtling to destruction—unless the fugitive hero can contrive a warning light, his entire worldly goods consisting of a match and a thousand-dollar bill....

And speaking of diabolical plots, a future column will discuss the most unbelievable solutions ever offered for the traditional Impossible Crime in the Locked Room. The reader is warned.

EXCUSES: The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells me there are five varieties of column: Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite. (See, all knowledge can still be found in fanzines.) Personally I write a sixth sort, variously known to architects as the Irregular, the Contrived or the Bitty....

In this merry vein I began drafting this very page, a fanzine piece which was to be full of such lyric wit and invention that your puny minds could not contain the wonder of it. Unfortunately a column deadline was growling at me from elsewhere, so I cannibalized the above opening paragraph to introduce a long boring dissertation on assembler code for *Apricot File* magazine, and thus sacrificed fannish commitment to corrupt personal gain. I felt bad about it all the way to the bank.

CRIMEWATCH

For a long, long time I've had a crazed liking for both hard SF and "traditional" detective stories. It's easy to fudge up a few comments on how both appeal through a kind of intellectual *frisson* which rather too often involves ludicrous gimmickry. "My God, Holmes, you mean to say that the murderer escaped the hermetically sealed chamber using a sleight-of-hand trick which happens to be workable only on a gas giant orbiting an anti-neutron star with radar mirrors placed at the Trojan points?" Crime puzzles often hinge on offbeat snippets of science, while hard SF writers are addicted to mystery plots in which the hidden arch-villain is likely to be a recessive gene, a gravitational quadrupole interaction, or a dimensionless constant.

One admits guiltily that the frequency of addiction to either genre for pure relaxation and entertainment is a hint that the "intellectual" bit may sometimes be a trifle spurious. Don Marquis said it: "If you make people think they're thinking, they'll love you; but if you *really* make them think, they'll hate you."

Nasty-minded people can find a confirming parallel in the tradition of enthusiastically amateurish criticism. Here for example is the much-respected Ellery Queen duo, whose *Queen's Quorum* (1951, revised 1969) makes familiar grandiose claims for its genre's antiquity (you know, the first detective story ever published was "The History of Bel" in the Apocrypha, etc) and explains the virtues of chosen "cornerstone" books in such terms as....

Melville Davisson Post's *Uncle Abner* is second only to Poe's *Tales* among all the books of detective short stories written by American authors. This statement is made dogmatically and without reservation: a cold-blooded and calculated critical opinion which we believe will be as true in the year 2000 as we wholeheartedly believe it to be true today. These four books [the other three are by Doyle, Chesterton and Poe] are the finest in their field—the *crème du crime*. They are an out-of-this world target for future detective-story writers to take shots at—but it will be like throwing pebbles at the Pyramids.

You may begin to get the impression that the Queens sort of liked the Post book. If you were waiting for some actual justification of all that windy hyperbole, tough luck: as with so many paeans about the supreme and unsurpassable wonderfulness of cyberpunk (remember cyberpunk?), this level of critical analysis is all you get.

But then, I rather like trivia. One of the most fascinatingly useless books in my collection is *Locked Room Murders* by Robert Adey (published by Ferret Fantasy in 1979). This consists of a long numbered list of 1,280 books and stories about "impossible"

crimes, with an appendix giving all the solutions. Some of these terse plot giveaways make pretty boggling reading, and often induce a powerful urge never ever to read the book. Here's a selection of my favourites. These are the solutions only. What the problems were...is going to be your problem.

19. In one instance the victim had been killed earlier than had originally been thought the case. The other solutions...all depend upon the victims being hypnotized into doing things or believing that they had done them.

26. [The gold was] siphoned off through a dummy electric wire conduit.

64. Victim, while in bath, was tricked into handling a copper spider through which an electric current was passed.

That reminds me that one of Colin Watson's detective novels had an even nastier trick with an electrified beetle attached to a wall. The wall was made of porcelain and formed the back of a gents' public lavatory. According to Watson, there is an almost irresistible psychological urge to *aim* for any foreign body such as a fake beetle...whereupon, *fzzzzzz!* Something similar happened without any need for interposed beetles at the Eastercon in 1975, where the De Vere Hotel's new nylon carpets charged everyone up to millions of volts and did fearful things to the virility of male fans who failed to earth themselves before visiting the loo. But let's return to the list....

68. After killing, the murderer stepped into an incinerator and incinerated himself.

70. The body, still "alive" but in a state of suspended animation, was hidden in a false laboratory bench.

75. The killer, a midget, was still in the room, hidden in a leather hatbox, when the door was broken down.

91. The deaths were engineered by a person dressed as a werewolf....

100. The killer bought and left a block of frozen nitro-glycerin which exploded as the fishmonger attempted to break it with his hammer.

131. The killer entered the house disguised as an elephant, and escaped down a secret tunnel which he later nailed shut....

132. Victim accidentally threw a live cartridge into a live electric light socket. The metal base of the cartridge melted and it was fired as though from a revolver.

139. The mask had been smuggled out in the pouch of a stuffed kangaroo....

146. A ventilator above the corpse was removed leaving a small hole through which an armadillo, rolled into a ball, was lowered. It proceeded to deface the dead man.

147. Murderers got past guard to victim by impersonating a horse.

366. The killer, an African pygmy, was hidden in a coal basket when the entrance was forced.

369. The victims were strangled by a hybrid creeper.

519. The victim was killed by the lid of the old Victorian Bath in which he was sitting, which fell on him when he picked up a rigged loofah.

534. The jewels had been stolen by a trained white rat whose hideaway was a footstool with a false compartment.

540. Webs spun across the magnifying lens of a telescope by a pet Venusian spider caused brain damage to the victim when he looked through it....

542. The bus was hidden under a stairway with a secret opening.

574. The house was built around the corpse.

628. Victim strangled himself while under the influence of poisoned cigarettes.

634. Dagger was made from a plastic ashtray which after it had been used reverted on application of hot water (in a teapot) to its original shape.

683. The deceased had drunk whiskey containing a radioactive isotope before he entered the locked room. The whiskey had been considered harmless because the murderer had already partaken of it, but he had taken care to immunize himself before drinking.

706. The victim was being poisoned by a faulty central heating system and, in rising with desperate suddenness to escape it, struck his head on the painted base of a chandelier.

I heard about another version of this cunning trick in which the insidious gas filled the victim with such insane strength that, starting flat on his back, he leapt ten feet out of bed and impaled himself on a spike in the ceiling. Scotland Yard, I am reliably informed, was baffled.

787. The murderer wore a tartan kilt and blended in with the scenery.

855. A line was looped under the victim's armpits and was attached at the other end to a captive shark. When the shark was released it raced off and dragged the victim overboard.

861. Victim is dehydrated, stuffed through the cell bars and then, once back inside, rehydrated.

889. The platinum dust was taken out in honey consumed by bees owned by the thief.

890. The murderer drank the water in which he drowned his victim.

954. The victim, who had the peculiar habit of eating grapes from the wallpaper design, was poisoned by someone who knew of the habit and put cyanide on [them].

972. The stabbing was done by an already present diabolical floating machine which afterwards burnt itself out.

977. The poison had been administered by a red ant enticed by a scent on an envelope delivered to the victim.

The one glaring omission from this shortlist is, "Brain death was induced by reading a lengthy sequence of improbable gimmicks selected from Robert Adey's book by the fiendish criminal Dave Langford." It's a fair cop, guv.

TAFF THOUGHTS. En route I began my collection of US roadsigns, like PED XING (surely a member of the Gang of Four) and YIELD (surely a signpost from Camelot). ENTER ONE VEHICLE AT A TIME ON GREEN sounded vaguely like musical chairs; NO STANDING ANY TIME might or might not be aimed at pedestrians; there was a certain classic simplicity in WRONG WAY. As for STANDPIPE SIAMESE DIRECTLY BELOW, none of us Brits really dared to speculate....

